

Matthew 25:31–46 — When the Son of Man Shall Come in His Glory

Three Companies, the Brethren and the Gospel of the Kingdom, Foundation of the World, New Creation, and the Millennial Kingdom

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31–46; Matthew 19:28

“When the Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.

“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

“Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

Not a Parable: A Literal Coming and a Real Judgment

This passage is often called the parable of the sheep and the goats, but that description is not quite accurate. A parable creates a likeness — the kingdom of heaven is like such and such. Here the persons are likened to sheep and goats, but the event itself is described as something that will literally happen. The Son of Man shall have come in his glory; he shall sit on his throne; the nations shall be gathered; he shall separate them. This is not the kingdom of heaven being likened unto something; it is a real separation at a real coming, described in the same prose character as the first section of Matthew 24. Calling it a parable and therefore putting it in the same register as the ten virgins or the talents is a

category confusion.

This is also not the final judgment of the great white throne. That judgment follows the millennium and deals with the dead who are raised to stand before God (Revelation 20:11–15). What we have here is the judgment of the living nations, preliminary to the millennial reign. Paul wrote to Timothy that the Lord will judge the quick and the dead — the living and the dead. This passage is the judgment of the quick, the living nations, as the millennium is about to begin. Those before him are alive, not raised.

Three Companies, Not Two: The Critical Key to the Passage

The single most helpful thing for understanding this passage is to count the companies present before the Son of Man. Most of Christendom has counted only two: the sheep on the right, the goats on the left. But verse 40 opens a third: inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. The sheep company is not the same company as these my brethren. They are commended for having ministered to the brethren. The goat company failed to minister to the brethren. The brethren are a third company, present before the throne, distinct from both sheep and goats.

Once this is seen — that there are three, not two — the many details of the passage fall into place. Who are the brethren? They are not Christians in the present sense. The ignorance of the sheep and goats alike — Lord, when saw we thee? — is entirely unfitting for the mouths of sealed believers. No Christian who has known the Lord would say, Lord, when did I ever see you hungry or naked? The entire assumption of ignorance that runs through both the sheep and the goat answers points to people who had not known him in the personal, intimate way of present-day sealed saints. This passage has nothing to do with Christians standing at doomsday. The ignorance is appropriate to those who had encountered the brethren without knowing who they were or what their Lord

was.

The Gospel of the Kingdom and the Brethren

Matthew 24:14 gives the context: this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come. The end of the section we are reading flows from that preaching. The brethren are those who went forth preaching that gospel — proclaiming that the Lord Jesus is coming back to sit on the throne of his glory. They will have passed through persecution such as the world has never seen. Hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, in prison — these are the conditions of men who are preaching a message that the world hates, in a period of unparalleled tribulation. The sheep are those among the nations who received their message and ministered to them. The goats are those who did not.

When the king says inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, he identifies those preachers as his brethren. That is a Jewish remnant of the tribulation period, connected with Israel and the preaching of the kingdom gospel. They are not to be confused with the present assembly of God, whose members are brethren of the Lord in a different and more intimate sense — sons, the bride of Christ, those in whom the Spirit of his Son cries Abba Father. These my brethren are brethren in a more general sense, his kinsmen according to the flesh, through whom he sent his message to the nations.

From the Foundation of the World vs. Before the Foundation of the World

Verse 34 contains a phrase that is precise and important: inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. This is not a careless expression. The scripture consistently distinguishes between blessings prepared from the foundation of the world and blessings chosen before the foundation of

the world, and the distinction marks the difference between earthly and heavenly blessing.

Ephesians 1:4 says God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. That is the language of the heavenly people, the church, whose blessings are not connected with the earthly order of things at all. Here in Matthew 25:34, the kingdom is prepared from the foundation of the world — which is the consistent way scripture speaks of what belongs to the earthly sphere, because those blessings are bound up with the earth itself and its creation. If the passage had anything to do with Christians and heaven, we would expect the language of Ephesians 1:4. We get the opposite. This is one among many indicators that the judgment of Matthew 25:31–46 is altogether earthly in its character and its results.

The Regeneration: Matthew 19:28 and the Renewing of Things

Matthew 19:28 gives a connected expression: ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. The word regeneration here does not mean new birth in the individual sense. It means the renewing of all things — the making of things new — which is what the millennium is: the curse lifted in large measure, the creation renewed under the reign of Christ, a new order established under God's government in the earth. It is not the perfect state, since certain aspects of the curse remain (the serpent still goes on its belly, certain marshes are not healed, and so forth), but it is the highest order of earthly blessing the world has ever known. The washing of regeneration that Paul speaks of in Titus 3:5 uses the same word in a different application — the making new, the cleansing — but with the individual believer as its subject.

New Creation, New Birth, and Quickening: Distinct Things

The millennial saints will not be in the new creation. New creation in the sense of 2 Corinthians 5:17 — if any man be in Christ, it is new creation; old things have passed away — is the distinctive blessing of those who are sealed with the Holy Spirit and united to Christ as head in heaven. New creation began when Christ rose from the dead. He is the firstborn from the dead, the head of the new creation. When he breathed into his disciples the Holy Spirit in John 20, he brought them into a new connection with himself as the risen one — his resurrection life flowing into them as the life of the risen stalk flows into the grains. The place where this life is had is in Christ, a sphere that did not exist before Christ went into glory.

New birth is not the same as new creation, though every member of the new creation has been born again. New birth was operative in Old Testament saints — they received life from God, they were quickened, but they were not quickened together with Christ, co-raised with him, seated in the heavenlies in him. Those are distinctives of the present age. The millennial saints will have a very great advance over Old Testament saints, but they will not be sealed with the Spirit in the way that binds members of the body to Christ as head in heaven, and they will not therefore have that resurrection life that is the distinctive character of the new creation. Their blessing is earthly — it is the highest form of earthly blessing — but it does not reach into the heavenly sphere.

My Father: A Careful Distinction in the King's Words

The king says to the sheep: come, ye blessed of my Father. He does not say your Father. The distinction is deliberate. Millennial saints will not have been sealed with the Spirit of his Son whereby we cry Abba, Father. The intimacy of Abba Father is the distinctive of the Spirit-sealed believer of the present age. The Lord's prayer in Matthew 6 — our Father who art in heaven — expresses a real relationship, but one that carries with it a sense of distance: in heaven. The

millennial saints, like the disciples before Pentecost, will be able to say our Father who art in heaven, but they will not have the Spirit of sonship to cry Abba. The king's words are precise: it is his Father, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The blessing flows to these earthly ones from a God who is the Father of their Lord and King, but the special intimacy of Abba, given to those indwelt by the Spirit of the Son, is the church's own.

Recognizing Him: What the Christian Can Do with This Passage

Though it is not the Christian's lot to be among the sheep, the goats, or the brethren in this scene, the Christian can recognize him in it. He is the Son of Man come in glory — the rejected one is coming back as the glorified one. He is the shepherd who divides and separates — consistent with the character we have known in him who does not like to plow with an ox and an ass together, who has always had an interest in separation. He is the king sitting on his throne of glory — the throne that David and Solomon together typified, Solomon's peaceable reign following David's wars, as Christ's millennial reign follows his coming as the rider on the white horse of Revelation 19.

The scripture is written that we might see him in it. The Christian reads Matthew 25:31–46 not as a passage about himself but as a passage about his Lord — who is going to be glorified in the earthly sphere as he is already glorified in the heavenly. God's purposes for the earth are not cancelled, they are not spiritualized away, and they are not confused with the heavenly purposes. Both will be fulfilled. The Lord will sit on the throne of his glory; the kingdom will come; the Father's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.