

Matthew 25:35–46 — Inasmuch as Ye Have Done It unto One of the Least of These

Nations Judged, the King's Brethren, Eternal Fire, and the Meaning of Hades and Sheol

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31–46; Revelation 20:11–15; 1 Peter 3:18–22

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

“Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

The Setting: Not the Church, Not the Final Judgment

This passage is often misread because its setting is not carefully observed. This is not the church; this is not the final great white throne judgment. The scene is nations — not individuals, not the church — standing before the Son of Man on his throne of glory. Three groups are in view: the king's brethren (the godly Jewish remnant of the last days), the sheep nations (Gentiles who received the messengers of the kingdom), and the goat nations (Gentiles who did not). The passage follows the coming of the Son of Man in his glory (verse 31), which is itself preceded by the wars of the great day of God — the beast and false prophet dealt with, the king of the north, Gog — and is followed by the establishment of

the millennial reign. The 1335th day of Daniel 12 marks the full realization of millennial blessing.

The charge that dispensationalists make this a salvation by works — saved because of how they treated the king's brethren — misunderstands the passage. These nations treated the brethren rightly because they received the message the brethren brought. The reception of the messenger was the reception of the message. The fruit of faith is shown, not faith replaced by works. The Lord judges by the fruit of their reception of the preached word of the kingdom.

Inasmuch as Ye Did It unto Me: Close but Not the Body

The statement in verse 40 — inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me — echoes the words of the risen Lord to Saul on the road to Damascus: Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Both speak of an identification between the Lord and his own. But they are not the same identification. On the Damascus road, the Lord meant that those persecuted ones were members of one body with him as the head — to persecute them was literally to persecute him. Here in Matthew 25, the relationship is different. These are the Lord's brethren according to the flesh — the Jewish remnant who are dear to him, who preach for him, for whom he feels deeply — but they are not members of one body in the mystery sense.

Israel's position is to be a twelve-tribed nation under one Messiah, as David was king over all Israel. The Lord Jesus will be king over them in his millennial kingdom. That is a relationship of profound love and identification, but it is not the body relationship of Ephesians. This distinction matters because there is a climate of opinion in Christendom that dulls down the truth of the one body by assimilating it to the Lord's relationship with Israel. The one body is the distinctive mystery of this dispensation; it is not the same as the Lord's care for his earthly people.

Everlasting Punishment: The Same Word as Everlasting Life

Verse 41 speaks of everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Verse 46 speaks of everlasting punishment and life eternal. The word translated everlasting or eternal is the same Greek word in all three uses. To apply it differently in these cases — accepting eternal life but denying eternal punishment — is willful. You cannot take a knife to the word and divide it against itself within the same context. Those who argue for annihilationism read eternal punishment as the permanent and final destruction of the person — they are gone for eternity, therefore the punishment is eternal. But this argument is exposed by Revelation 20:10: the beast and the false prophet, cast into the lake of fire before the millennium, are still there after the thousand years, being tormented day and night to the ages of ages. A thousand years at minimum of conscious torment contradicts annihilationism entirely. If you are annihilated, you are not being tormented.

The human mind recoils at the eternity of punishment. It is horrible to contemplate. But God is not good according to our definition of goodness. He is good after his own goodness. If he says that the torment is to the ages of ages, then that is good, even if we cannot see it. We need to bow to it. Romans teaches that the goodness of God leads to repentance. No one who is led to repentance will ever have to think about any of this.

The Distresses of the Remnant: Temporary vs. Eternal

The list of distresses in verses 35 and 42 — hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison — describes the condition of the Jewish remnant during the great tribulation. They went hungry, they were strangers, they were imprisoned. All of it was temporary. God sent provision and comfort to them through the faithful Gentiles who received them. But when the king comes, all of that is exchanged for the glory of the kingdom. Whereas the everlasting punishment has no visiting

hours. No one will come after some time to say, I am here to comfort you in your troubles. There is no lessening, no diminishment. The contrast between temporary distress with a glorious end and eternal punishment without relief is the sharpest possible.

Hades and Sheol: A State, Not a Location

The passage connects naturally with the larger question of what happens after death, and with the language Scripture uses for it. The Hebrew word sheol and the Greek word Hades are used in parallel by the New Testament writers and carry a consistent meaning: the unseen state, the condition of the soul after death. Death has to do with the body; Hades has to do with the soul. To say that someone has died is to say their body is in death. To say their soul is in Hades is to say their soul has entered the unseen state.

The theory that Hades is a physical underground location with compartments — a Paradise section and a torment section, linked by geography — is the product of reading Greek mythology into biblical words, and of reasoning geographically about what Scripture intends to describe as a state. The Lord Jesus told the dying thief: today thou shalt be with me in Paradise. He said this while hanging on the cross. He had said earlier, in John 16, I go to the Father. There is no reason to locate Paradise underground. He went to the Father; the thief went with him. Paradise is the presence of God, as 2 Corinthians 12 and Revelation 2 confirm.

First Peter 3:19 is a key text misused for the compartment theory. The text says that by the Spirit, Christ went and preached to the spirits now in prison, who were formerly disobedient in the days of Noah. The correct reading is that the Spirit of Christ in Noah preached to those people during Noah's day; those people are now in prison (the unseen state of the lost, awaiting the great white throne). This is confirmed by verse 19's use of the present tense: spirits which are in prison. They are there now, not emptied out. The two-compartment theory requires him

to have preached to them in prison — past tense, in a place — but that is not what the verse says. William Kelly's book on Christ preaching to the spirits in prison treats this whole subject thoroughly.

Tartarus, used in 2 Peter 2:4 for the fallen angels, is the Greek word for the lowest depth of the underworld in Greek mythology. Peter uses it to convey the deepest possible condition of confinement for those angels — cast down to the deepest pit of gloom, in Darby's rendering. This is not an endorsement of the whole Greek mythological system; it is the use of a word to convey the force of divine judgment. At the great white throne, death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire — the body raised from death and the soul from the unseen state are reunited and judged, and then cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death. That is final. That is hell in the proper sense — the permanent, eternal state of the lost, outside the new heavens and the new earth, forever.

These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.