

AN INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 24—25

Part XXXIX

by Thomas Ice

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ Then they themselves also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

—Matthew 25:31–46

The third and final section of Matthew 25 is a key New Testament passage that includes the sheep and goats judgment after the second coming. This final section of the Olivet Discourse (found only in Matthew) is a difficult passage for some preterists and all posttribulationists to handle. However, the dispensationalist has no problem understanding it since he takes it to mean exactly what it says.

CHRIST’S GLORIOUS COMING AND JUDGMENT

This passage is difficult for many preterist because amazingly they believe that this second coming judgment passage was fulfilled in A.D. 70. Gary DeMar says, “there is little evidence that the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ in Matthew 24:27, 30, 39, and 42 is different from the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ in 25:31. Compare 25:31 with 16:27, a certain reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.”¹ DeMar fails to explain the details of the passage that speak of a return in glory with “all the angels with Him.” In

addition, when did our Lord judge the nations in A.D. 70, as depicted in this passage? This is clearly a future event and such a major event that it is hard to imagine how it can be confused with A.D. 70. Arno Gaebelein tells us:

It is evident that these words must be connected with chapter xxiv:30, 31. The scene takes place after His visible and glorious appearing as Son of Man and after His elect (the remnant of His earthly people; that is, the "all Israel") have been gathered. Leaving out the central portion of the discourse, the three parables, relating to the Christian profession, we have in chapter xxiv:3–41 and chapter xxv:31–46 chronological events relating to the end of the Jewish age and the judgment which follows immediately after the Lord has come.²

JUDGMENT OF THE SHEEP AND GOATS

Only Jesus mentions the judgment of the nations that will take place when "He will sit on His glorious throne" (25:31) immediately after His second coming to establish His kingdom (25:31-46). The dividing process is seen in the judgment of the gentiles using the analogy of the sheep and goats. The sheep gentiles are those who have been good to the Jews during the Tribulation, defending them at the risk of their lives, visiting them in prison and feeding them during those desperate times. Those who persecuted them or rejected them will be put on the left side and are known as goats, signifying their rebellion towards God. For this rebellion they "will go away into eternal punishment" (25:46).

The fact that the sheep are those who have been good to the Jews during the Tribulation period is an indication they are born again believers in Jesus whose "brethren" they protected and aided (25:40). These individuals from among the Gentiles will befriend the Jews because they are "righteous" (25:37), meaning they have been made "righteous" by faith in the blood of the Lamb and His subsequent resurrection. The Greek word for righteous is also used of the doctrine of justification by faith (i.e., Christ's righteousness is imputed to a believer). They are good to the Jews for the same reason. John Walvoord says, "works are presented here, not as the ground of salvation, but as the evidence of it, in the sense of James 2:26, where it is declared, 'Faith without works is dead'; that is, it is not real faith unless it produces works."³ The Abrahamic covenant is still in vogue and will be even during the millennium. It should be remembered, Jesus said in verse 46, that these "sheep," or believers during the Tribulation, go "into eternal life."

There are three different groups at this Judgment of the Nations to determine who goes into the millennium. The unsaved followers of Antichrist left at the end of the Tribulation He calls "goats." The believers who survive the martyrdom of the Tribulation He calls "sheep," who demonstrate their gift of "righteousness" through the blood of the Lamb. The third category is the "brethren" whom the sheep befriend. Those whom Jesus calls "my brethren," are the Jews who go into the Millennium in belief. Thus, we see that only believers will enter the Millennium—Gentile believers and Jewish believers from the whole house of Israel.

POSTTRIBULATIONAL PROBLEM

Posttribulationists believe that the rapture and the second coming are either the same event or occur with virtually no interval between them. This passage presents a problem for posttribulationists as noted by Ron Rhodes as follows:

Within premillennial eschatology, Matthew 25:31-46 is properly interpreted as referring to the judgment of the nations. The nations are comprised of the sheep and the goats, representing the saved and the lost among the Gentiles. According to Matthew 25:32, they are intermingled and require separation by a special judgment. This judgment follows the second coming of Christ, since it occurs “when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him” (Matthew 25:31). However, this judgment seems somewhat infeasible (as well as unnecessary) if, as posttribulationists hold, the rapture takes place at the Second Advent. At a posttribulational rapture, a separation of the saved from the unsaved would take place at that point. Accordingly, most posttribulationists either ignore this passage entirely, or relate it to the final judgment after the millennium.⁴

Believers who come to faith in Christ during the tribulation are not translated at Christ’s second advent but carry on ordinary occupations such as farming and building houses, and they will bear children (Isa. 65:20-25). This would be impossible if all saints were translated at the second coming to the earth, as posttribulationists teach. Because pretribulationists have at least a seven-year interval between the removal of the church at the rapture and the return of Christ to the earth, this is not a problem because millions of people will be saved during the interval and thus be available to populate the millennium in their natural bodies in order to fulfill Scripture.

It would be impossible for the judgment of the Gentiles to occur after the second coming if the rapture and second coming are not separated by a gap of time. How would both saved and unsaved, still in their natural bodies, be separated in judgment, if all living believers are translated at the second coming? This would be impossible if the translation takes place at the second coming, but it is solved through a pretribulational gap between the two events.

Walvoord points out that if “the translation took place in connection with the second coming to the earth, there would be no need of separating the sheep from the goats at a subsequent judgment, but the separation would have taken place in the very act of the translation of the believers before Christ actually sets up His throne on earth (Matt. 25:31).”⁵ If pretribulationism is true then there is no problem of how the Lord will populate the millennium with mortals. Those who will be saved during the tribulation and physically survive until Christ’s return, whether Jew or Gentile, will populate the millennium in their moral bodies. This will be a great event that Bible-believing Christians look forward too. Maranatha!

(This is the final installment of this series.)

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Smyrna, GA: American Vision, 1997), p. 190.

² Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, [1910] 1961), pp. 539–40.

³ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 202.

⁴ Ron Rhodes, *Posttribulationism and the Sheep/Goat-Judgment of Matthew 25—A Summary-Critique of Robert Gundry's View*, (A paper presented to the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas, TX, December 2003), p. 1.

⁵ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1957], 1979), p. 274.