

~Judgment of the sheep and goats~

by David B. Curtis

Matthew 25:31-46

In this discourse, the Lord is answering His disciple's questions about 1) the destruction of the temple, 2) His parousia, and 3) the end of the Jewish age.

Up to this point we have seen that the Olivet discourse of Jesus is one connected and continuous prophecy, which was all to take place, according to our Lord's prediction, before the existing generation should pass away.

Matthew 24:34 "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.

Now we encounter a passage which, in the opinion of almost all commentators, cannot be understood as referring to Jerusalem or Israel, but to the whole human race and the consummation of all things. This passage seems to take a wider range than Jerusalem and Israel; it reads like the judgment, not of a nation, but of all nations; not of a city or a country, but of a world; not a passing crisis, but final consummation.

This is not a new section, introducing a new subject, but is an integral part of the prophecy against Israel. *This text deals with the judgment of Israel and the end of the Jewish age.* Strictly speaking, this passage is not a parable, though it does contain parabolic elements.

Matthew 25:31-32 "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. 32 "All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats."

This text is connected with what goes before. This is apparent by the language used. If we compare this text with Matthew 24:30-31, we will see that he is talking about the same thing.

Matthew 24:30-31 "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 "And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

In both texts we see the Son of man coming in glory, with His holy angels for the purpose of judgment. The text in **Matthew 24:30-31** has a very clear time statement with it: **Matthew 24:34** "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. The Lord's coming in glory with his angels, for the purpose of judgment, was to come in the life time of those to whom He spoke. **Matthew 25:31-46** is speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the end of the Jewish age. It is not a new topic, but simply an elaboration of Jerusalem's judgment.

It deserves particular notice that the description of the coming of the Son of man in his glory, given in our text, corresponds in all points with that in **Matthew 16: 27-28**, of which it is expressly stated that it would

be witnessed by some, then present, when the prediction was made.

Matthew 16:27-28 "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. 28 "Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

If we compare the two texts, we will see that in *both* passages:

- (a) The subject referred to is the same, the coming of the Son of man- the Parousia.
- (b) He is described as coming in glory.
- (c) He is attended by the holy angels.
- (d) He comes as a King. "Coming in his kingdom;" "He shall sit upon his throne; Then shall the King,"
etc.
- (e) He comes to judgment.
- (f) The judgment is represented as, in some sense, universal. "He shall reward every man." "Before him shall be gathered 'all the nations'."

In **Matthew 16:28**, it is expressly stated that this coming in glory was to *take place in the lifetime of some then present*. This fixes the time of the Parousia within the limit of a human life, thus being in perfect accord with the period defined by our Lord in His prophetic discourse. "This generation shall not pass."

I think that we can clearly see that the coming of the Son of man in **Matthew 25:31-32**, is identical with that referred to in **Matthew 24:30-31** and **16:27-28**, which some of the disciples were to live to witness. Our text is clearly speaking of a first century event. This judgment took place in AD 70. The destruction of Jerusalem, the coming of Christ, the resurrection, and the judgment are all connected in Scripture. Notice the similarity of our text to: **Matthew 13:40-43** "Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. 41 "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, 42 "and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. 43 "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

At the end of the (Jewish) age the Son of Man returns with His angels to judge the wicked and reward the righteous. We see from verse 43 that this is also a time of resurrection. Verse 43 is a quotation of Daniel 12.

Daniel 12:1-3 "At that time Michael shall stand up, The great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. At that time your people shall be delivered, Every one who is found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those, who are wise, shall shine like the brightness of the firmament and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.

Verse 1 speaks of the great tribulation of **Matthew 24:21**, which will be a time of deliverance for the elect of God.

We see this same idea in: **2 Thessalonians 1:6-8** since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, 7 and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, 8 in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not

know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Daniel 12:2 tells us that at this time the resurrection takes place. Those resurrected are either given everlasting life or everlasting contempt. We see this same idea in our text in **Matthew 25**. **Daniel 12:3** is the verse that is quoted in **Matthew 13**. Thus, the coming of the Son of Man in **Matthew 25:31**, is the same as His coming in **Matthew 13:41**, which is the same event spoken of by **Daniel in 12:1-3**. This all happened in AD 70 and was manifest by Jerusalem's destruction.

Matthew 25:31, states that, "Then He will sit on the throne of His glory." This is not a literal throne, it expresses the idea that he will come as a king and judge. In **Matthew 20:21**, two of the disciples ask Jesus to grant them the right to sit on His right and left hand, "in the Kingdom." The parallel passage in **Mark 10:37** says they asked to sit with him, "in thy glory." The kingdom is the glory of Jesus! Thus, if Jesus came in his glory, he came in his kingdom.

The words, "*all nations*" in verse 32 have led many to believe that this passage is not referring to the destruction of Jerusalem at the close of the Jewish age, but to a universal and final judgment of all mankind.

Does the phrase, "all nations" jump us ahead thousands of years to a future judgment of the world? I don't think so. We know that it is not uncommon to find, in Scripture, universal propositions which must be understood in a qualified or restricted sense. For example we see this in: **Matthew 24:22** "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

Now, we know from our study of **Matthew 24**, that the tribulation was the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman armies, and yet we have an expression used in regard to the inhabitants of a city or country, "no flesh would be saved," which is wide enough to include the whole human race.

The phrase, "*all nations*" is equivalent to, "*all the tribes of the land*" used in: **Matthew 24:30** "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth (or land) will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

* There is no error in designating the tribes as 'nations'. In our Lord's time it was usual to speak of the inhabitants of Palestine as consisting of several nations. **Josephus** speaks of, "*the nation of the Samaritans*," "*the nation of the Galileans*,"-- using the very word *ethnos* which we find in our passage. *Judea*, was a distinct nation, often with a king of its own; so also was *Samaria*; and so with *Idumea*, *Galilee*, *Paraea*,-- all of which had, at different times, princes with the title of **Ethnarch**, a name which signifies the ruler of a nation. It is doing no violence, then, to the language to understand *ethnos* as referring to, "*all nations*" of Palestine, or "*all the tribes of the land*."

This view can be supported by the fact that the same phrase is used in the great commission: **Matthew 28:19** "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

This commission is given to the 11 disciples (**Matthew 28:16**). Did they understand this as a charge to evangelize the whole world? I don't think so. If they did understand it this way, they were negligent in acting upon it.

Professor Burton observes : " It was not until fourteen years after our Lord's ascension that St. Paul traveled -for the first time, and preached the gospel to the Gentiles. Nor is there any evidence that during

that period the other apostles passed the confines of Judea."

The disciples (10 years after Pentecost in Acts 2) seemed quite surprised to find out that, "the Gentiles had received the gift of the Holy Ghost," and that, "God had granted to the Gentiles also repentance unto life."

Acts 10:45 And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

Acts 11:18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

When Peter was challenged for going in, "to men uncircumcised, and eating with them," he doesn't appeal to the great commission saying, "we were commanded to go to all nations." That would have been my response if I was in his place. Unless I didn't view the great commission as a call to world evangelism.

If the phrase, "all nations" had been understood by the disciples in its literal sense, it is difficult to imagine how they could have failed to recognize at once the universal character of the gospel, and their commission to preach it alike to Jew and Gentile. It required a distinct revelation from heaven to overcome the Jewish prejudices. Peter tells Cornelius about his vision from God.

Acts 10:28 Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

When did God show Peter that? It was in Acts 10, which was about ten years after the great commission was given.

Paul, through revelation, learned the mystery, "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ by the gospel."

Ephesians 3:3-6 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.

In light of these texts, it seems reasonable to to give the phrase, "all nations" a restricted sense and to limit it to the nations of Palestine. In this sense it fits well with the words of our Lord in: Matthew 10:23 "When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."

They were commissioned to preach the gospel to Israel and Jesus told them that they would not reach all of its cities before the Son of Man came in His parousia.

Matthew 25:33-34 "And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: God's elect are represented under the common image of His "sheep." God's sheep are blessed inasmuch as they now take their inheritance. The kingdom was prepared for God's elect from the foundation of the world. Those who come to God for salvation, come because they have been chosen by Him from eternity past.

Ephesians 1:4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,

2 Thessalonians 2:13 But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,

The Judge tells them that the kingdom was prepared for them, that is designed for them, or appointed for them from the beginning. God has no new plan.

Matthew 25:35-40 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' 37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

We see here that the destiny of the righteous and the wicked is determined by their treatment of those Christ calls, "my brethren." There is nothing said here about faith, the judgment is based on acts of love toward the distressed brethren of Christ. It is not surprising that this text causes much perplexity both to theologians and general readers.

William Barclay writes, "This is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke, and the lesson is crystal clear-- that God will judge us in accordance with our reaction to human need."

Is this the doctrine of Paul? Is this the ground of justification before God set forth in the New Testament? Are we to conclude that the everlasting destiny of the whole human race, from Adam to the last man, will finally turn on their love and sympathy towards the persecuted and suffering brethren of Christ? Not according to the teaching of the New Testament.

Romans 3:24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

The Greek word used here for, "freely" is *dorean*. It means gratuitously (lit. or fig.):--without a cause, freely. "Freely by his grace"- the expression is redoubled to show that all is of God and that nothing in this act of justification belongs to, or proceeds from man.

Romans 3:28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Romans 4:5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

Romans 11:6 And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

The clear teaching of the New Testament is that salvation is by grace through faith alone. Yet this text in Matthew 25 seems to be saying that judgment is based upon works. The difficulty is easily and completely solved if we regard this judicial transaction as the judgment of Israel at the close of the Jewish age. It is the rejected King of Israel who is the judge: it is the hostile and unbelieving generation of Jews, the last and worst of the nation, that is arraigned before His tribunal.

Matthew 23:35-36 "that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

As those first century Jews responded to Christ's disciples or "brothers" and aligned themselves with their distress and afflictions, they aligned themselves with the Messiah whom they preached. The acceptance or rejection of the disciples was based upon their acceptance or rejection of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Saul persecuted Christians because he did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. In attacking them, he was attacking Christ.

Acts 9:5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

The people designated as, "these my brethren," and who are taken as the representatives of Christ Himself, are evidently the apostles of our Lord, in whom He hungered, and thirsted, was naked, sick, and in prison. All this is in perfect harmony with the words of Christ to His disciples, when He sent them forth to preach"

Matthew 10:5-7 These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. 6 "But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 "And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The were called to preach the gospel of the kingdom to Israel. Those of Israel who didn't receive their words would receive a judgment worse than that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Matthew 10:14-15 "And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. 15 "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!

Jesus warns them that Israel hated Him, so it would also hate them.

Matthew 10:25 "It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!

Jesus told them that their reception or rejection would be His reception or rejection.

Matthew 10:40-42 "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. 41 "He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. 42 "And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."

Because the Jews hated Christ, they mistreated His followers. Those who believed in Christ were kind in their treatment of His disciples. Thus, judgment is based upon faith or rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

Matthew 25:41-46 "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 'for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 'I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did

not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' 44 "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Those who trust in Christ are blessed and enter the kingdom. Those who reject Christ are punished by being eternally separated from Christ -- "depart from me." Their destiny is "everlasting fire" -- the image employed here is used to express extreme suffering.

Notice in verse 44 that the goats call Him Lord. This is the fulfillment of: **Philippians 2:11** and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Please notice the contrast in verse 46: **Matthew 25:46** "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Everlasting punishment-- the original word here translated, "punishment" means torment, or suffering inflicted for crime. The noun is only used one other place in the New Testament-- **I John 4:18**, "Fear hath torment." The verb from which the noun is derived is used twice:

Acts 4:21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done.

2 Peter 2:9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment,

If this word does not teach that the wicked will suffer, no word could express the idea. The word translated, "everlasting" is the Greek *ionios*. The New Testament uses this word sixty-six times. Of these, in fifty-one instances it is used of the happiness of the righteous; in two, of God's existence; in six, of the church, the Messiah's kingdom; and in the remaining seven, of the future punishment of the wicked. If in these seven instances, we attach to the word the idea of limited duration, consistency requires that the same idea of limited duration should be given it in the fifty-one cases of its application to the future glory of the righteous, and the two instances of its application to God's existence, and the six cases of its appropriation to the reign of Messiah and the glory and perpetuity of the church.

Both the punishment and the life are designated by the same adjective, "aionios," clearly indicating their equal duration. It is regrettable that the translators used two different adjectives to translate the word, *aionios*. If one can be proved to be limited in duration, the other can by the same arguments.

We have here, not the final judgment of the whole human race, but that of the guilty nation or nations of Palestine, who rejected their King, despitefully treated and slew His messengers, and whose day of doom was now near at hand. This being so, the entire prophecy on the Mount of Olives is seen to be one homogeneous and connected whole. It is a clear, consecutive and historically truthful representation of the judgment of the Theocratic nation at the close of the age, or Jewish period.

A universal judgment in our future is entirely unnecessary as those who have died since AD 70 already know where they will spend eternity. When a person dies, his spirit immediately enters heaven or hell. So, what purpose would there be of a final judgment?

John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall

not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

John 5:24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life."

Those who do not believe in Jesus Christ will not see life, they are under the wrath of God. Believers have already passed from death to life and will not come into judgment. Believers will stand before Christ to give an account of what they have done in the body and to receive rewards.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. The bema (judgment seat) was well known to the Corinthians. Believers will be judged in a review of their works for the purpose of rewards.

As we come to the close of the Olivet Discourse, I would like to read you a quote from **J. Stuart Russell**, *"Before passing away from this deeply interesting prophecy it may be proper to advert to the marvelously minute fulfillment which it received, as testified by an unexceptionable witness,-- the Jewish historian Josephus. It is a fact of singular interest and importance that there should have been preserved to posterity a full and authentic record of the times and transactions referred to in our Lord's prophecy; and that this record should be from the pen of a Jewish statesman, soldier, priest, and man of letters, not only having access to the best sources of information, but himself an eye-witness of many of the events which he relates. It gives additional weight to this testimony that it does not come from a Christian, who might have been suspected of partisanship, but from a Jew, indifferent, if not hostile, to the cause of Jesus.*

So striking is the coincidence between the prophecy and the history that the old objection of Porphyry against the Book of Daniel, that it must have been written after the event, might be plausibly alleged, were there the slightest pretense for such an insinuation.

Though the Jewish people were at all times restless and uneasy under the yoke of Rome, there were no urgent symptoms of disaffection at the time when our Lord delivered this prediction of the approaching destruction of the temple, the city, and the nation. The higher classes were profuse in their professions of loyalty to the Imperial government: 'We have no king but Caesar' was their cry. It was the policy of Rome to grant the free exercise of their own religion to the subject provinces. There was, therefore, no apparent reason why the new and splendid temple of Jerusalem should not stand for centuries, and Judea enjoy a greater tranquility and prosperity under the aegis of Caesar than she had ever known under her native princes. Yet before the generation which rejected and crucified the Son of David had wholly passed away, the Jewish nationality was extinguished: Jerusalem was a desolation; 'the holy and beautiful house' on Mount Zion was razed to the ground; and the unhappy people, who knew not the time of their visitation, were overwhelmed by calamities without a parallel in the annals of the world.

All this is undeniable; and yet it would be too much, to expect that this will be regarded as an adequate fulfillment of our Savior's words by many whom prejudice-or traditional interpretations have taught to see more in the prophecy than ever inspiration included in it. No doubt there are some portions of this prediction which are capable of verification by human testimony. Does any one expect Tacitus, or Suetonius, or Josephus, or any other historian, to relate that 'the Son of man was seen coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; that He summoned the nations to his tribunal, and rewarded every man according to his works'? ***There is a region into which witnesses and reporters may not enter; flesh and blood may not gaze upon the mysteries of the spiritual and immaterial. But there is also a large portion of the prophecy which is capable of verification, and which has been amply verified. Even***

an assailant of Christianity, who impugns the supernatural knowledge of Christ, is compelled to admit that 'the portion relating to the destruction of the city is singularly definite, and corresponds very closely with the actual event'.

Russell continues. *"The punctual fulfillment of that part of the prophecy which comes within the field of human observation is the guarantee for the truth of the remainder, which does not fall within that sphere. We shall find in the sequel of this discussion that the events, which now appear to many incredible, were the confident expectation and hope of the apostolic age, and that the early Christians were fully persuaded of their reality and nearness. We are placed, therefore, in this dilemma -- either the words of Jesus have failed, and the hopes of His disciples have been falsified; or else, those words and hopes have been fulfilled, and the prophecy, in all its parts, has been fully accomplished. One thing is certain, the veracity of our Lord is committed to the assertion that the whole and every part of the events contained in this prophecy were to take place before the close of the existing generation. If any language may claim to be precise and definite, it is that which our Lord employs to mark the limits of the time within which all His words were to be fulfilled. Whatever other catastrophes, of other nations, in other ages, there may be in the future, concerning them our Lord is silent. He speaks of His own guilty nation, and of His judicial coming at the close of the age, as had been often and clearly foretold by Malachi, by John the Baptist, and by Himself."*

Earnest Hampden-Cook in his book, "Christ Has Come," written in 1905, puts it this way: *"By a process of reasoning the astronomer Adams discovered the planet Neptune before it had been seen by human eyes. He knew that there must be such a planet, because its existence was essential for the explanation of other undoubted facts. In the same way, although it cannot be proved from history that the Lord Jesus personally and visibly returned to the earth at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D., yet relying on His solemn teaching we may be morally certain that He did so return. The past Second Advent is the key to the understanding of the whole New Testament. In the light of this one event a world of mystery vanishes and a new world of truth stands revealed."*