

Dear Friends,

Sadly, it is quite likely that more errant teaching is taught and accepted in the Christian community in our day regarding the Second Coming than any other single Bible topic. Routinely in many Christian circles, the Second Coming is used as a morbid tool to frighten people. This idea and its use contradicts the consistent and oft-repeated teaching of Scripture that the Lord's return and judgment is a day of joy and fulfillment for the family of God. In the closing verse of 1 Thessalonians 4 at the conclusion of his teaching on the Second Coming and the glorifying change that all God's children shall experience simultaneously, Paul specifically reminds us, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." Lord give each of us grace and Biblical insight and wisdom to always think of that day and event with such comfort.

Lord be praised for that day,
Joe Holder

Sheep and Goats

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: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. (Matthew 25:31-46 KJV 1900)

Neither Matthew nor Jesus in the passage refer to this lesson as a parable. I do not view it as a parable. However, since I have written on the two parables in the chapter leading up to this lesson, and since Jesus used symbolic language in the lesson, I chose to include the lesson in this series.

Occasionally Bible students attempt to explain this lesson as referring to something other than the Second Coming and final judgment. From my perspective, Jesus' language in Verse 31 simply says too much for us not to view it as that final event of judgment and separation. Perhaps the most common alternate view of the lesson regards it as the Lord coming in judgment against Jerusalem, the lesson Jesus taught in detail in Matthew 23-24. My "Read" of Jesus' introduction of the lesson in Matthew 25:31 doesn't match that event. I do believe He "Visited" Jerusalem and the religious leaders of the temple in judgment by the devastation the Romans poured out against them in the siege of 70 AD. However, in that event, He appeared in judgment, not glory. One nation, first century Judah, appeared before Him in judgment, not "all nations." Further, He did not separate the Jews gathered in Jerusalem into blessed and cursed subgroups. All the people gathered in the city were judged alike.

In Jesus' opening explanation of the lesson, He prepares us to read more of judgment and separation versus blessing. We read of only two classes of people in the judgment, described in the symbol that Jesus chose, sheep and goats. In the judgment against Jerusalem that occurred in 70 AD, the wise and blessed didn't go to Jerusalem when they saw the Roman army approaching. They obeyed Jesus and "Headed for the hills," avoiding judgment, which was part of their blessing. All who fled to Jerusalem suffered the ordeal of the siege.

...he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. A shepherd separates sheep from goats based on the distinct nature of the two animal species. No goat or sheep protests their separation. The shepherd is in charge and knows what he is doing. Jesus' audience would have been quite familiar with this activity.

As we study this lesson, we should be cautious not to interpret it as an allegory. Jesus used the sheep-goat symbol to identify that a shepherd has a functional reason to separate the animals in his flock based on their nature. Does a shepherd know the difference between a sheep and a goat? Of course. And does Jesus know the difference between "*...them that are his*" (2 Timothy 2:19 KJV) and those who are not His? Yes, as surely as a shepherd knows the difference between a sheep and a goat. We shouldn't take the point further, as if it were an allegory.

In the actual judgment event that Jesus described, all nations, not one nation, are assembled before Him. Those who loved and worshipped Him shall have reason to rejoice at seeing Him on His throne. Those who despised Him shall have reason to fear His righteous judgment. They can no longer demean and ridicule him. He is there, and He is in charge of the day. His judgment shall prevail—period. Not the sheep's or the goats' or demons'. Only His judgment shall rule that day. Do you trust Jesus and His righteous judgment? If so, you have no reason to fear that day.

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. In first century Jewish culture, to sit at the right hand of a special person was a place of honor. They shall realize that honor when they hear His words, "*Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*" Occasionally folks who believe in salvation by grace will question that the works of each group are highlighted, wrongly concluding that the lesson teaches salvation by works. No, Jesus' choice of one word, "***Inherit***," resolves that dilemma. People who receive an "Inheritance" are entitled to that inheritance because they were named in a will of the person who wrote the will and died, making the will an active legal document. In most cases, those who inherit part of an estate are family members of the deceased person who wrote the will. Specifically in this judgment and inheritance, all those who "Inherit" this eternal kingdom shall be "Children" of God, members of His family by new birth, and then, after the resurrection, also by adoption. (Adoption relates to the physical body's resurrection at the Second Coming. Romans 8:23 KJV)

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in. Keep this verse in its context. Does behavior make a sheep a sheep or a goat a goat? No. Jesus taught a principle regarding false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20 KJV).

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. (Matthew 7:20 KJV)

Believers who become too obsessive about knowing who is saved and who is not often quote this verse to justify their conduct, but they do so at the contradiction of context. Jesus introduced this lesson with the words....

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. (Matthew 7:15 KJV)

Conduct identifies character, or, in the case of a shepherd separating sheep from goats, the species of the animal, a sheep or a goat. More notable in my thoughts is the fact that both groups, the symbolic sheep and the symbolic goats, were surprised at the words of the "Shepherd."

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? (Matthew 25:38-39 KJV)

And the "Shepherd's" reply was also similar to each.

And the King shall answer and say unto them, 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. (Matthew 25:40 KJV)

Give sober reflection to Jesus' words. In His judgment, what we say and do, even to "the least" of His "brethren," (Remember the point regarding inheritance and His "Family") He takes personally, as if we did it to Him. The next time you become irritated at another believer or think about criticizing them, or finding fault with something they said or did, remember Jesus' words in this verse. Would you talk to Jesus in the same tone or with the same attitude as you have toward this fellow-believer? Yes, this measure convicts each of us, for, at some time or another, we allow our humanity to overrule our spirituality and think or say words to other believers that we soon regret. The more we memorize this verse and keep it foremost in our minds the more we shall control our minds and tongues. In clear terms, Jesus takes personally whatever we think, say, or do toward one of His children, even "the least" of them.

What is the final outcome of this lesson?

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matthew 25:46 KJV)

Occasionally folks who view this lesson differently make more distinction of the two English words "everlasting" vs. "eternal" than the text allows. I've heard their explanations, but I've never been able to make a lot of credible sense of them. Factually, both words in our King James English Bible were translated

from the same Greek word. This is one of many cases in which we see evidence that the translators used different words, not always to make major spiritual points, but to provide better readability of the text.

Nothing in Jesus' words remotely indicates that the duration of the state of one class shall be any different from the other. Both shall stand before Him on the same "Day," or "hour," as Jesus refers to it in John 5:28. The simplest and most obvious way to describe Jesus' words is that both outcomes shall be permanent and, to respect both English words and the one Greek word, final and endless.

If we respect and follow Jesus' words in this lesson, we can learn much about that final epochal day. For the children of God, "my brethren," to use Jesus' own word, beginning to end, there is nothing to fear. We shall be blessed beyond our expectation or imagination. We shall be pleasantly surprised at the blessed outcome, "*When saw we thee...?*" And we shall have eternity with Him in secure and blessed—uninterrupted and unimpeded—fellowship and praise to Him for our redemption. (Revelation 5:9 KJV)

The Second Coming in Scripture consistently appears as an event of great joy, comfort, and blessing.

Wherefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:18 KJV)

I personally find great objection and fault with any professing believer, much less professing Bible teacher, who uses this event as a tool to frighten believers by the event. In doing so, they callously wrest the teachings of Scripture that reveals the reality of that day for our present encouragement and comfort. (2 Peter 3:16 KJV)

When our world is breaking apart by the trials and stresses of its own brokenness, when nothing seems to be going well with us, we can look to Scripture's teaching on the Second Coming and rejoice that we can look forward in faith to that better day when the Lord shall bring to glorious fulfillment every promise of blessing and joy he made in Scripture. So the blessing doesn't come today. Face the day in steadfast faith. Abraham waited twenty-five to thirty years to see God's fulfillment of His promise, but he saw it with great joy. Such seasons of pressure and trial are the perfect moment to review Paul's conclusion in Romans 8:35-39. We need not fret at the thought of final separation from the Lord and His gracious, saving love.

Elder Joe Holder