

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

MATTHEW 25:31-46

THIS is the third and last section of the Olivet prophecy.

In order to its interpretation we must first remind ourselves of its relation to the two previous sections, and of its relation to the whole message of the Gospel in which it is found. Then, moreover, we must be careful not to read into this section of the prophecy things which it does not contain; for while it has often been interpreted as though it were a description of the final judgment, it really has nothing whatever to do with the final judgment, that is with the Great White Throne.

When these things are seen we shall be able to understand the true meaning of this remarkable passage, and to examine the process which it so graphically describes.

Along these lines, therefore, we shall proceed:

- First examining the section in its relation to its context;
- Secondly, attempting to see the events which the Lord refers to, in their place in His whole economy;
- Finally examining the process which it describes.

First, then, the relation of this section of the Olivet prophecy to its context.

Jesus had come forth from the Temple, and we must bear in mind that in the Temple He had been dealing with those who were opposed to Him, whose opposition culminated in His own rejection and casting out. Coming from the Temple, He uttered that distinct prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and of that Temple. Then, presently, when they asked Him the question, **“Tell us, when shall these things be, and what shall be the sign of Thy coming, and of the end of the world (age)?”** in replying, our Lord uttered the Olivet prophecy.

Christ was standing in the midst of circumstances which were all against Him, from the standpoint of human observation.

To all human seeming He was defeated. The opposition which had characterized the attitude of the rulers toward Him was succeeding, and in a very few hours their work would be complete, and they would have put Him away. Yet He stood in the midst of a group of loyal disciples.

This was the first night He stayed near Jerusalem. As we have seen, He had been going down to Bethany, not staying in Jerusalem, and the very night that He did stay in the neighborhood, He was arrested.

He was on the verge of the final defeat, and yet He stood among that little group of men, the Master of Empire, quietly and with dignity surveying all the centuries, and telling these men in language which their finite minds could not perfectly comprehend, in language about which, until this day, we have not been able to say the last word, telling them the process, and the issue. There was not a shadow across the imperial brightness of His thinking; there was not a tremor in the accents of His voice. The King was looking through darkness to light, through defeat to the ultimate victory.

This third section of the prophecy He commenced with the words, "**When the Son of man shall come in His glory,**" and then proceeded to describe what would happen at that coming among the nations.

But now let us set the whole prophecy in relation to the Gospel according to Matthew.

This Gospel is the Gospel of the King, and the theme is that of the Kingdom, the Kingdom not as a state into which men pass by death, but as a condition to be established on the earth.

First of all in our Gospel the King was presented to our view. Then we had a great section describing His propaganda; He enunciated laws, He exhibited benefits, He enforced claims. Whether we study the laws, or consider the benefits, or listen to the claims, they all have to do with the earth.

The laws of the Manifesto are not for life in heaven when a man has escaped this world. The benefits existing are not benefits conferred upon the heavenly inhabitants; they are benefits for time and earth. The claims, as He enforces them, are claims of present Kingship, and present authority. Christ taught His disciples to pray, "**Our Father Which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done.**" Where? "**as in heaven, so on earth.**" The passion of Jesus was for the setting up on earth of a divine order.

Do not misunderstand this. He has other work. He also takes all the ages and all the universe of God into the compass of His mind and His purpose. It reaches to the uttermost bound of the universe of God, and includes all the unborn ages. But for this earth Christ had a purpose, and for this world He had a passion, and all through the Gospel of Matthew He is seen dealing with this.

When we come to this third section, we find, the rejection by men of God's King for the world. But if man rejects the King, God enthrones Him. Presently we see Him coming back from the dead, and standing on the slopes of Olivet with His disciples, we hear Him utter the commission according to Matthew.

- **“All power (authority)”** - it is the word of the King
- **“is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.”** In the heaven, which is the pattern; on the earth, where the pattern is to be realized.
- **“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations.”** Not make disciples of the nations.
- **“baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost . . . and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.”**

Here the commission is, **“Teach all nations,”** that is, prepare them, influence them.

The figures of the Manifesto are first salt, aseptic, preventing the spread of corruption; and then light, flashing upon the darkness. So the disciples were to be a presence in the world affecting the national life of the world.

The King, Who had enunciated His laws, exhibited His benefits, enforced His claims, and been rejected, and was about to be cast out, stood in the midst of the little company of men who had crowned Him, and He said to them, “This advent is not the last thing, this dying is not the end, this refusal to receive Me is not the consummation; the rough and bloody Cross which will be raised in a few hours is not the end; **‘When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit on the throne of His glory.’** “

The King was looking:

- Through the darkness of the accomplishing Passion
- To the light of the accomplished Purpose,
- And He described in this section, not the final judgment, not the last assize, not the great day, but the initial movement when He shall be manifested again.

Now let us look at the events as described.

Notice first the matters which must be excluded, if we are to understand this prophecy.

This is not the Great Assize, not the Great White Throne. The Son of man is not seen here as Judge, but as King. When we come to the wonderful language of Revelation we read:

“And I saw a great White Throne, and Him that sat on it, from Whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life.”

There is not a single hint of this kind of thing here.

The great Throne is not set; earth and heaven are not fled away there is no resurrection of the dead; these are not dead people raised that are seen in front of the King.

What are the facts?

The first is that the Son of man is on the Throne, which is a regal rather than a judicial throne. He speaks of Himself through all the processes as the King.

“Then shall the King say unto them . . . I was an hungred, and ye gave Me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink.”

This is the word of the King, Whose person we saw in the first chapters, Whose propaganda we followed through the central chapters, to Whose passion we are now coming. It is the King, the Son of man on the Throne of His glory, in contrast to the Throne of His grace, which was the Cross. It is Christ's declaration that beyond all the things of the moment, which seemed to spell out defeat for Him, the Son of man will be manifested as occupying the throne.

The next fact is that of the Son of man manifested as holding the reins of earthly government.

He shall gather about Him all the nations. The Son of man is the Administrator of the affairs of the earthly Kingdom, and this is His picture of the initial process in the consummation of that administration - the gathering of the nations, the separating between them, the finding of a verdict, and the passing of a sentence.

Now let us examine the process, and first we observe the center of order, the Son of man upon His throne. This is the hope of the world.

We notice next the first exercise of His authority - the gathering of the nations.

This does not at all necessarily mean that all the nations of the world are to be gathered to one geographical situation; it is the exercise of actual power on the part of Jesus, the gathering up of the nations into one great whole, Himself being the center and reigning King. This is to be brought about by an actual advent. We cannot spiritualize these things without losing them.

Having gathered the nations around His Throne He separates them, putting on the one hand those who are described figuratively as sheep, and on the other those who are described figuratively as goats. This is the national separation.

He first gathers the nations into one, so breaking all our present divisions and separations. But then He makes a new separation. It is a separation upon the basis of character - sheep and goats, to adhere to these words which are symbolic.

In that hour the distinction between Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, and others, will be secondary. He will compel their attention to Him, demand their subjection, and having gained it, He will separate amongst them.

What an hour of separation that will be in the history of the world; while all the lines of division which are so patent to-day, and in which some of us boast, will end, and end forever. If a man sees God, he sees Christ's separation and Christ's division even now; he believes that fundamentally **“He hath made of one blood all nations of men.”**

The first process of the King will be thus to gather together, and then to institute a new separation, not between tribes and families and nationalities as in the past, but between those whom He designates sheep and goats.

Then He proceeds to explain the difference between the two, by the verdicts He finds, and the sentences He passes.

The sentence of those on His right hand will be:

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

That has nothing to do with heaven. That is earth. The King is seen establishing the earthly kingdom, and He calls righteous people to inherit it. It is the Kingdom of God. The King will say in effect; Go back to God’s Divine intention. Enter into this world as God intended it should be when He made it. From the foundation of the world that Divine purpose was that humanity should constitute a theocracy, that God Himself should govern, and that men should owe and own allegiance to no one but Himself.

When Christ comes He is going to set up that order.

Then He made very clear the basis upon which He will separate, and the reason upon which He will admit to this Kingdom. He said; **“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat.”** What did He mean?

He told His disciples that the very people He would invite into His Kingdom would ask that question; “What dost Thou mean? Wast Thou hungry, O Thou that sittest upon the Throne. When saw we Thee hungry?” What was His answer?

“Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”

What did our Lord mean when He spoke of His brethren?

In the twelfth chapter of this Gospel we read, **“While He yet talked to the people, behold, His mother and His brethren stood without, desiring to speak to Him. Then one said unto Him, Behold, Thy mother and Thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with Thee. But He answered and said unto him that told Him, Who is My mother? and who are My brethren? And He stretched forth His hand towards His disciples, and said, Behold, My mother and My brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of My Father Which is in heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother.”**

Now Christ was talking to this selfsame handful of men, telling them of the process when He comes and sets up His Kingdom; and He told them that He will say to those whom He gathers from the nations, **“Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”**

That is to say, nations will be admitted to the inheritance of the Kingdom upon the basis of their attitude toward Christ as revealed in their attitude toward His people during the preliminary period.

Let us keep the perspective in view. The last commission given to these, His brethren, was to disciple the nations. Among the nations there are those who hear, obey, follow, receive, are at least sympathetic toward, - and in the measure in which the disciples of Jesus create that attitude, they are preparing for the establishment of His Kingdom in the world. And there before His throne He will receive all men of character whose attitude toward Himself has been defined by their attitude toward the brethren, not after the flesh, but by that closer affinity of loyalty to the will of God.

Then He will turn to those upon the left, and reveal the righteousness of their exclusion from the order which He has come to set up; **“Depart from Me, ye cursed, into the everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels,”** that is, into association with those who have destroyed the earthly order.

They will not be admitted when the King commences His sifting operation, into the benefits of the Kingdom. Any of those who have been against the ideals and the character of the Kingdom, as they have been represented, will not be admitted.

This is the picture of a crisis initiating a new order and ending of a previous one.

This is national judgment. The thought of personal retribution is not before us here, or of personal reward; it is that rather of Christ’s sifting among the nations as He prepares for the setting up of the Kingdom. Exactly the same process goes forward. **“I was an hungered.”** Why, we never saw Thee, Lord of glory, hungry!

“Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these.”

I have sent through all these centuries into your countries and among your peoples, My brethren, souls living in the will of God, My witnesses; and I have sent them not merely that men may be saved, but that you may see the ideal of God’s government in the world. You would not receive them, you have neglected them, and in neglecting them you have neglected Me. Therefore you cannot enter into the Kingdom.

“These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal.”

The terms are co-equal in value, and whatever one means the other means. Only remember that here Christ is not dealing with the subject of the soul’s destiny either in heaven or in hell.

They are terms that have to do wholly with the setting up of the Kingdom here in this world. and those methods by which He will assume the reins of government, excluding some and including others.

Now to summarize.

This section of the prophecy describes in broad outline, and as to underlying principle, how the King, to quote His own words as they appear in the parables of the Kingdom in the thirteenth chapter, “**shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity;**” and thus prepare for that new era in which “**the righteous shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father.**”

Before turning to the application of this to ourselves as to personal responsibility, let us be clear as to the solemnity of these words.

It does not minimize the solemnity of the words, to deny that this story has anything to do with the Great Assize, or the Great White Throne, or the settlement of the eternal destiny, and to accept the picture as a simple prophetic portrayal of what will happen in connection with the second advent.

When looking at anything in perspective down a long distance, it is always difficult to dissociate the far from the near. When studying the Old Testament prophets we find constantly that the prophet described as he saw things coming, and yet he seemed to bring together things which we have found far apart.

One prophecy only in instance of it - “**To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God.**”

As the ancient prophet uttered it seems as though the two things were close together, but when Jesus came He said, “**To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,**” and He shut the book, and nineteen centuries have gone and the final day of vengeance has not begun yet.

We must allow for perspective. There may be an order, a development, a program, but it would not appear that anyone has found it out accurately. But quite simply this is Christ’s picture. He is the King.

Men have said, We will not have Him, they will drive the nails and break His heart, and fling Him out. And He said to the little group around Him, “**The Son of man shall come in His glory . . . then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory.**”

And when He comes; there will be;

- Not merely pity, but power;
- Not merely mercy, but might;
- not merely the gathering-in tenderness of such as need His help, but the flinging out in stern severity of all that which is against the eternal principles of right.

In the words of the Christ, He will “**Gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity.**” What for? In order that “**the righteous**” may “**shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father;**” not in heaven, but here on the earth.

Finally this picture flashes its light back upon our last study and reveals anew to us our responsibility.

Within the household we are to be obedient to the absent Lord.

As individuals we are to be ever waiting for His coming.

As His representatives we are to be prosecuting His commerce in the world, trading with the Master's goods, gathering men one by one to the living Christ for personal salvation; living and witnessing by life so as to create an atmosphere, an influence, a testimony which shall be the opportunity for men everywhere to see and know something of the Kingdom, and so to prepare the way for His coming, that when He comes He may enter into an inheritance which we have created for Him, far wider than that of the individual souls gathered, an inheritance of an influence created, and a test made by which nations shall be admitted to, or excluded from, the Kingdom as He shall establish it.

~ end of chapter 66 ~

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