

Revelation 39
Separating the Sheep from the Goats
Revelation 19:15

We have come to a place in our study of the book of Revelation that deals with a subject that is more widely discussed in the Gospels, and that has to do with the judgment of nations as nations. To understand these truths we will have to see certain passages of Scripture in a new light.

When Israel's leaders questioned Christ's authority, He affirmed in John 5:22 that God had given Him authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of man. Christ could claim no greater authority than the authority to judge man, for the one who sits in judgment is superior to those being judged. Since Christ will be the judge of all men, obviously He is superior to all. In anticipating the glory that shall be revealed at His second advent, Christians are prone to forget that the one coming as King of kings and Lord of lords is also coming as Judge. Before He can establish His kingdom and ascend the throne and rule, He must remove every obstacle to His reign. John 5 has affirmed the fact that Christ has the right to judge, a right that was conferred upon Him by the Father. Matthew 25 describes the judgment, which Christ will execute when He comes to this earth the second time. The fact that Christ is the Judge of all men is so indelibly written on the mind of men that the very mention of His coming strikes fear in their hearts. While a child of God anticipates Christ's coming and looks forward to it as a blessed hope, the mention of His coming to an unbeliever causes him to draw back and cringe in fear because he instinctively knows that Jesus Christ is a judge, and he is not prepared to face Him in judgment.

The fact that Christ is a judge scarcely needs to be proved, because it is so generally recognized. But Matthew describes two judgments that take place at Christ's second advent. The first judgment is described in 25:1-30. It is a judgment on living Israelites, those physical descendants of Abraham who had received the promises and covenants of God, in which He asserted that He would send the Messiah who would provide redemption and then would gather the redeemed together, set up a kingdom for them, and rule over them as their King. The Old Testament prophets made it clear that no unsaved person could enter the kingdom, which the Lord Jesus Christ will establish, on this earth when He comes the second time. That is why Christ said to Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again." Apart from a new birth, Christ said to him, "One cannot see the kingdom of God." Christ was only summarizing what the Old Testament prophets had taught, that when the Messiah comes, He must cause all men to pass under His judgment in order that He might remove the rebel and exclude the unbeliever, and that He might receive into His kingdom those who have trusted Him for salvation.

In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the Lord is teaching that the

nation Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, must be subjected to a judgment. Those who have light and life will be received into His kingdom. Those without light and life will be excluded. The ten virgins were divided into two groups. Five were wise, and five were foolish. Notice that all ten had one thing in common: all had lamps. But there the similarity ceases. The possession of lamps suggests that all had an opportunity, a chance to hear, a message delivered to them that salvation had been provided; but not all had availed themselves of the offered salvation. While all had lamps, they were divided on the basis of what they had in their lamps. Five were foolish because their lamps were empty. They had no oil, the source of light. Light was the sign of life, and Christ says in this parable that there would be those in Israel who had an opportunity to know the truth of God's Word and to receive the salvation provided through Christ, but they had not availed themselves of that opportunity and were without light and life. They therefore were excluded. On the other hand, there were those who had the opportunity and they responded to it. They received the offered salvation. They are pictured as having oil in their lamps. They had light, and light was the sign of life; thus the Lord in this first parable tells us that when He comes at the Second Advent He will judge the nation Israel to separate believers from unbelievers, to exclude the unbelievers from the kingdom He will establish and to receive believers into that kingdom.

In Matthew 24 the Lord said that two would be in the field. One would be taken away in judgment and the other left to go into the kingdom. Two women would be grinding at the mill. One would be taken away in judgment and the other left to go into the kingdom. That is the separation that takes place at the judgment that Christ will execute at His second advent. There will be one in Israel taken away in judgment and another left to go into the kingdom.

At the conclusion of Matthew 25 a second great judgment is mentioned. It is the judgment of nations or the judgment of Gentiles. Verse 31 says this judgment will take place when Christ returns to earth, "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." At the time of His ascension, Christ was received up into glory, and He was seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Some who are not careful students of the Word tend to confuse these two things. They believe verse 31 refers to Christ's ascension, so they think Christ's enthronement was at the time of His ascension. But notice that these are two quite different events. "The throne of his glory" is the throne that was promised to David in 2 Samuel 7:16 where God appeared to David, made a covenant with him and said one of his sons should sit on David's throne and rule over his kingdom forever. That throne of David was occupied by a number of David's descendants until Nebuchadnezzar removed the last Davidic descendant from the throne. The throne was left unoccupied until Jesus Christ came as the Son of David. He offered Himself to Israel as a King to occupy that throne.

Had He been received by Israel as their King, He would have occupied David's throne and would have revealed God's glory from that throne. But Israel rejected Him. Thus, God postponed Christ's ascent to the Davidic throne until the second advent, when this throne will be reestablished over Israel and Christ as a Davidic Son will mount the throne and reveal the glory of God's power and love for Israel, as well as God's faithfulness to His covenants and promises as He regathers Israel and fulfills the promises made to them. So, in verse 31, Christ is pictured as mounting the throne promised to David in which He and He alone had the right, and He shall sit on the throne of His glory. Then verse 32 tells us that before Him shall be gathered all nations. Now the word translated "nations" is the Greek word that is most frequently translated "Gentiles." It may refer to nations as nations, or it may refer to Gentiles as people distinct from Israel. It is in that latter sense the word ought to be understood in verse 32, "Before him shall be gathered all the Gentiles."

In verses 1-30 Matthew has described Christ's judgment on Israel in which He separates the wise from the foolish, takes the wise into His kingdom and excludes the foolish. Now Matthew proceeds to the second aspect of this judgment at the Second Advent: judgment on Gentiles as Gentiles. According to Revelation 11:15 when Christ comes the second time, He will subdue nations as nations, and bring them under His authority, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever." At the second event, Christ will exert authority over nations as nations and subdue them and subjugate them to His authority. This is described in Revelation 19:15, where John says about the rider on the white horse, "And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron."

This again describes Christ's dealing with nations as nations, when at His second advent He will deal with every military alliance that has been aligned against Him. He will break the power of nations and will exert His authority over all who have called themselves kings and lords so that He shall be King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus at the Second Advent Christ will deal with nations as nations. This was described earlier in the studies of the campaign of Armageddon. But in Matthew 25:32 quite a different event in the prophetic program is described. While military powers will be broken and brought into subjection to Christ, multitudes of individual Gentiles will not be judged when armies are destroyed and military might is broken. And in order to determine who from among the Gentiles will enter into Christ's earthly millennial kingdom, there must be a judgment in which these Gentiles are judged concerning their salvation, concerning their faith in Jesus Christ. So it is from this point that Christ will gather all nations before Him.

From the time that God called Abraham, He had a purpose for Israel. But He

also revealed to Abraham that He had a purpose for Gentile people. While Israel was the channel of blessing, Gentiles were to be blessed. In Genesis 12:3, for instance, God said to Abraham, “In thee [and in thy seed] shall all families of the earth be blessed.” The Gentiles will be summoned before the throne of Christ’s glory—the throne from which He manifests His essential glory and the glory of the Father. And when they gather there, Matthew 25:32 says they will be divided into two groups, sheep and goats, “He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.” As far as Matthew records the incident here, there is not a word spoken. But a shepherd controls his sheep by the movements of his hands; if one of his flock gets stubborn or rebellious or refuses to obey the signals from his hand, then he brings his rod and his staff into play. Here Christ as shepherd of the flock is doing the shepherd’s work and, with a motion, He separates sheep from goats, putting the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left hand.

Following Oriental custom, the right hand is the place of privilege, of blessing, and the left hand was the place of separation. When Jacob wanted to bless his two grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, he was careful about which hand he placed on which son because their destiny would be determined by which hand was placed on them. Why? Because the right hand indicated the heir and, if he had put his right hand on Manasseh, he would have been elevated to the position of prominence and Ephraim would have been relegated to the inferior place. So he carefully placed his hands, crossing them to put the right hand on the right Son.

The right hand was the place of privilege, the place of blessing, and there were those who were put on the right hand and others relegated to the position on His left hand. Christ then spoke to those on His right hand, and made this joyous announcement, as seen in Matthew 25:34, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

It is interesting that the Scripture should mention a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world. God made a promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, long after the creation of the world. But that was not the beginning of God’s program. At the outset God created this world to be a stage on which He would play out a great drama. It was to be a battlefield in which the contest between God and Satan would be fought, and God had determined that when His adversary had been destroyed through the death of His Son, this battlefield would be transformed and made into a paradise where He would bring those who had believed Him and had trusted Him. There before the foundation of the world, in order to answer Satan’s challenge that God had no right to be worshiped and believed and obeyed, God prepared a place and determined to populate it with those who had believed Him. So to those on His right hand He said, “Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom that God had prepared for you before this world was ever brought into existence.” This is an invitation of victory!

While it is a blessed invitation, some things about it created consternation, for in Matthew 25:36 Christ said to those invited into His kingdom, “For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.”

To a casual reader, this may seem to be salvation by works, as though these people were received into Christ’s kingdom because of what they had done. This passage is being used today to exhort and motivate people to all sorts of social action. It is the basis of the so-called Social Gospel that is being revived and preached today in which multitudes view the work of the church as the work of transforming society rather than redeeming individuals through Christ’s death. They say that this verse proves that God accepts into His kingdom on the basis of what was done in the poverty program and in the welfare programs and the health programs. As a church you ought to be involved in that sort of thing. What a misunderstanding of the Scriptures to proceed on such a basis as that! What is our Lord teaching? The righteous do not understand what they have done for Him, as seen in verse 40 where Christ said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

In order to understand what Christ is teaching, several other scriptures must be considered. Remember that following the church’s rapture at the beginning of the tribulation period, Revelation 7 tells us that God will sovereignly call and save 144,000 of the physical descendants of Abraham, often referred to as the 144,000 witnesses, they will have the same ministry that the apostle Paul had in his day. They will go with the gospel of salvation by grace through faith to the ends of the earth. They will tell men that Christ died and that there is salvation through His death, through His blood. As a result of their ministry, Revelation 7:14 says multitudes “washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” For the first three and one half years of the tribulation period, these witnesses will be privileged to preach without any interruption, with none to stop them. But then, according to Revelation 13, in the middle of the tribulation period, the head of the federated states of Europe will try to stifle the preaching of the gospel. He desires to exalt himself as God as well as king, and he forbids these to preach. Revelation 13:7,16 says, “It was given unto him to make war with the saints, to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.”

This head of the world government, which by that time will also have

become head of the world church, will institute an economic system to control all men, and his edict will be that no man can buy food unless he has his ration card, his sign of submission to the authority of the government. Those who have been going about as God's witnesses cannot and will not submit to his authority. They will refuse his identifying mark, not accepting his sign in their foreheads or on the palms of their hands. Therefore, they will not be able to buy or sell. Even though they had independent wealth, they cannot use it because they cannot carry out the simplest business transaction without the sign of submission to the beast. As a result, they will go from place to place, hungry, destitute, pursued by the authority of the state, cast into prison, stripped of their clothing.

Although they will be in dire circumstances, they will keep on witnessing. What will sustain them? Their only sustenance will come from those who receive their message and believe in the Savior they proclaim, and they will demonstrate that they have received the message of these messengers by providing for their physical and material needs. For example, a witness comes to a city and preaches. Somebody hears his message, and the Spirit bears witness with his spirit that this is the truth; and joyfully he receives Christ as Savior. After the meeting, he goes to the messenger and says, "Where are you going to stay tonight?" The messenger replies, "I haven't the faintest idea. I cannot go down to a motel. I do not have the proper ID card." And so the believer says, "Come home with me." But the witness says, "Don't you know that the powers that be have said that anyone who harbors one of us who preach the gospel will be persecuted for it?" He says, "Yes, but you also know that this same one has said that if you preach in the name of Christ, you are subject to a death penalty. You did not stop. You brought the message to me, and I have salvation. You must come home with me." And he sets a meal before him, feeds him, and clothes him. Someone tells the authorities that this witness has been disobeying the dictates of the government because he has been preaching.

During the night there comes a knock on the door, and the man is hauled into prison. The next morning this new believer comes to the prison with breakfast for the messenger. He nourishes him; he cares for him. Why? Because he has received the message that had been preached. That is the background of Christ's lesson in Matthew 25:40, where our Lord says to these whom He has invited into His kingdom, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren [my witnesses], ye have done it unto me."

They were not saved because they fed, clothed, housed and visited one of God's servants, but they did these acts because they had been saved. This is not salvation by works, but their works bear evidence to their faith. This is what James is talking about when he says that faith without works is dead barren or sterile. James is not teaching a man is saved by works, but he is showing that faith is a living thing and what is alive will reproduce itself. These have produced their works by faith, even with the threat of death hanging over them. They have

ministered to God's minister. They are received into Christ's earthly millennial kingdom because of their faith in the message of salvation that was brought to them by these witnesses who are called "my brethren."

Then Matthew 25:41 tells us that our Lord turns to the goats on His left hand and says, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Why this curse? Why this judgment? He explains it in similar terms in verse 42, "For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not."

They had the same opportunity to hear and receive the message that the sheep had, but they had demonstrated their rejection of the message by their lack of works. When they pleaded ignorance, Christ gave this response in verse 45, "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me." Our Lord said in effect, "These ministers of mine came to you with an offer of salvation that would have washed you and made you white in the blood of the Lamb, but you rejected it. How do I know you rejected it? Because there was no fruit, no evidence of faith." Where there was no life, there can be no fruit; and if you sow chaff into the ground, you will never get a harvest. Where there is no life, there can be no fruit. So Christ uses their lack of works as a proof of their lack of faith, and they are excluded from His kingdom.

In verse 46 our Lord says, "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment." Those who have no faith in Christ, no faith in His salvation, who have rejected Him as personal Savior, will go into everlasting punishment. But the righteous—those who have received Him and His salvation—will go into life eternal. To the Jewish mind, eternal life and entrance into the kingdom were synonymous terms. So our Lord was saying that when He comes He is coming as Judge and will determine just one question, "What have you done with the offer of salvation that I made for you?" He will test all men's response to this offer of salvation. Those who have received it will be received into His kingdom. Those who have rejected it will be excluded from His kingdom. The issue is very clear; there is no middle ground. A man is either saved or he is lost. He is either in Christ, or he is out of Christ. He is either dead or he is alive. And when Jesus Christ comes the second time, before He manifests Himself as King over the earth, He will manifest Himself in His divine authority to judge man, to exclude the unbeliever, to receive the believers into His kingdom and to witness His glory.

God knows the facts and He knows that a man outside of Jesus Christ is forever lost. He is a sinner under divine judgment and must be separated from a holy and righteous God. Knowing all that and not being willing that any should perish, God sent His Son to save men from the very hell that men deny exists. Men hope they can deny it out of existence; but written in their hearts is the conviction

that, as much as they wish it were not so, it is so. That is why men fear death because, after death, said the writer to the Hebrews, is the certainty of judgment. God has given Jesus Christ the authority to judge men and has committed judgment to Him, and God's Son must make a just judgment in keeping with the facts. When a man is a sinner, there is only one just judgment: separation from God. The facts cannot be altered. Any other judgment would be a perversion or miscarriage of justice. Christ came to offer men salvation and to offer Himself as Savior so that men who trust Him might hear His word, as recorded in Matthew 25:34, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Will you receive His great and eternal invitation?