

APPENDIX

After discussing the Great White Throne Judgment, I thought it would be profitable to briefly consider Matthew 25:31-46, wherein we read of another throne. Is this the same throne as the Great White Throne?

We will begin with the text:

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. 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. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 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: for I was hungry and you gave Me food . . ." Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You . . ." 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. 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: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food . . ." 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." And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Two different views of this important passage will be considered--that of William Kelly and the other of George Eldon Ladd.

The View of William Kelly

We have here, according to Kelly, a throne not to be confused with "the Great White Throne." What do we know about this throne here described in Matthew 25, and what comparisons can be made between it and the Great White Throne?

1. In Matthew, it is Jesus' own throne on which he sits as the Son of Man. When on earth, Jesus had no throne of his own but was seated on His Father's throne (Rev. 3:21), but now he is on earth seated on his own throne.
2. All the nations are gathered before him as he sits on his throne--gathered on earth, since there are no "nations" in heaven. "When men are risen from the dead, they will no longer be known as English or French; these national distinctions for them terminate."¹
3. In contrast to this throne, the Great White Throne of Revelation is not on the earth: *"I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away."* Writes Kelly, "I learn at once the positive contrast between Matthew and Revelation. In the latter only do we hear a word about heaven and earth fleeing away; in the former only we have very plain indications that the Lord is taking His throne in the government of the

¹ Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew*, pg. 377.

earth and of men living on it, not judging the dead when the kingdom is about to be given up."²

4. Standing before the throne in Matthew are "all the nations," a term never used about the dead or the risen. Thus in Matthew 25 they are living men, "the Gentile portion, as distinct from the Jews."³ (In Revelation 20 these nations have disappeared. "Satan had previously gone out to deceive the nations which are in the four quarters of the earth; and fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. Hence, though there were nations just before the great white throne, they had been completely destroyed by a divine judgment."⁴)

5. In Matthew the persons called before the throne are "all the Gentiles" or nations, whereas in Revelation none appear before the throne but "the dead, small and great."⁵

6. The evidence on which men are judged differ in the two accounts. In Revelation 20, the dead will be judged "*according to their works.*" In Matthew 25, "the principle of judgment is not according to works generally, but only a particular test is pressed upon them--faithful or unfaithful treatment of the king's brethren."⁶

7. The final outcomes are totally different. Kelly writes:

"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." It is a careful and divine discrimination--not a mere act of vengeance which deals with masses, in which all might be overwhelmed in common ruin. He separates them one from another. At the great white throne the dead stand all together: there is no question or need of separating them there.⁷

Delving a bit deeper into the Matthew 25 account, we must ask, Who comprises the "nations"? According to Kelly, they are Gentiles. And what is the blessing given to the sheep?

The blessing . . . given to these godly ones from among the Gentiles, is the inheritance of the kingdom prepared for them by the Father from the foundation of the world. The Lord gives them the key to it all--that which showed they were possessors of eternal life: "I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat . . ." Observe what they answer: "Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?" (Ver. 37.) And could a Christian, understanding the membership of the body of Christ, say such a thing to our Lord? Above all, could he say it in heaven, where we shall know even as we are known? Impossible. The fact is, however, that the scene does not speak about saints in heaven at all. The time of wondering ignorance will be past, I need hardly say, when we are in the resurrection state. But there will be godly Gentiles on the earth then. . . They are very far from full intelligence, and evidently in their

2 *Ibid.*, pg. 377.

3 *Ibid.*, pg. 378.

4 *Ibid.*, pg. 378.

5 *Ibid.*, pg. 379.

6 *Ibid.*, pg. 379.

7 *Ibid.*, pg. 380.

natural bodies still. And the Lord is instructing them even after He appears in glory. When He, having come, is as King seated upon His throne, we, raised from the dead, shall surely still cast our crowns before Him; but there will be no need of light on our part in that day. It is undeniable that the righteous *here* do require to be instructed. Hence there is a positive contrast between the heavenly Church and these future "sheep" of the Lord from among the nations. . . . It is evident that these Gentile sheep set forth men still in the condition that requires and receives instruction from Christ.⁸

Now who are the "brethren" spoken of in this passage--those whom the Gentiles (whether sheep or goats) were called upon to feed, visit, etc.? Continuing with Kelly,

Who are "these my brethren?" We have had the sheep and goats--the Gentiles righteous and the unrighteous; but who are the King's brethren? Men whom the Lord will send out before He comes in the glory of the kingdom; men sent to announce that He is coming in His kingdom. The sheep showed them love--care--sympathy in their sorrows. So that these brethren of the King must have been exposed to tribulation before the King appears. The conclusion is obvious that, in that day, the ground on which He will deal with the nations will be this--"How did you behave to my messengers?" The King's messengers, immediately before He appears in glory, will go forth preaching the gospel of the kingdom everywhere; and when the King takes His throne, those that received the gospel of the kingdom among the nations are recognized as "sheep," and the despisers perish as "goats." Those that honour the message treat the messengers well--caring for them, and identifying themselves with them . . . Their astonishment before His throne, at having done anything to Him in the person of His brethren, proves that they were not in the christian position, though truly believers.

But who were these brethren? From general principles of scripture and the special teaching of this prophetic discourse I have little doubt that the king's brethren in this case will be godly Israelites, employed by the Lord, after the Church has been caught up to heaven, to be the heralds of the coming King and kingdom.⁹

To the goats it is announced, "*Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*" Kelly closes this section on Matthew 25 with the following observation:

Observe, He does not say, Cursed of my Father, answering to "Blessed of my Father." God hates putting away. So when the awful moment comes for the curse to be pronounced on these wicked Gentiles, it is, "Depart from me, ye cursed. . . . Hell was not prepared for poor guilty man. He deserves it; but it was prepared for the devil and his angels. . . . How solemn to think that it was prepared for others, and that men share it with these rebellious spirits! It was not in the heart of God to make a hell for miserable man: it was prepared for

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 382, 383.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 383, 384. We note that a pre-trib rapture is certainly not crucial to this interpretation.

the devil and his angels.¹⁰

The View of George Eldon Ladd

Ladd's view is that Matthew 25:31-46 is a parable. For a good analysis of this position, we cite a section from Ken's paper on the Olivet Discourse. Part VII of this paper follows.

Part VII of Discourse: Separation of the Sheep and Goats

The last section of the Olivet discourse deals with judgment. During his earthly ministry, Jesus actually had very little to say about the eschatological judgment, and his discussion here is the most extended passage on the subject.

Matthew	Mark	Luke
25:31-46	[Missing]	[Missing]
<p>31"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.</p> <p>34"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'</p> <p>37"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'</p> <p>40"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'</p> <p>41"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'</p> <p>44"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you</p>		

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 385.

hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'		
---	--	--

45"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'		
---	--	--

46"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."		
--	--	--

Although this paper is not an exegesis of the Olivet discourse, a few comments on its concluding section are in order.

The Classification of the Passage

Let it be stated at the outside, however, that there is currently no view on this passage free of difficulties. In a situation like this, the theologian attempts to construct an interpretation with the least number of problems associated with it.

Having said that, there are two main approaches to the interpretation of this passage.

- It is a dramatic parable and not didactic eschatology. Therefore, it does not admit the possibility of determining when judgment occurs in the eschatological scheme.¹¹
- It is didactic eschatology and describes a specific judgment in the eschatological scheme.

Among those who take the latter approach, there is still much disagreement. Some argue that this judgment occurs at the second advent. Amillenarians (e.g., Hoekema¹²) and some postmillenarians (e.g., Strong¹³) would agree on this point and view the passage as a description of the "general judgment." Among premillenarians, dispensationalists would also agree that this passage points to a judgment occurring at the second advent, but they also argue that it is a limited judgment and one of several (e.g., Walvoord¹⁴). On the other hand, some historical premillenarians argue that this is the great white throne judgment at the end of the millennial reign of Christ, 1000 years after the second advent (e.g., Gundry¹⁵).

The approach taken in this paper is based on the following logic.

Step 1

If the judgment in this passage is taken as part of an eschatological schema or

11 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 205-206. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:422-423, also calls this passage a parable but takes a rather unusual view of what the parable depicts. While Ladd takes it to represent the final judgment, Buswell suggests that it depicts a continuous process that extends from the second advent to the great white throne judgment. However, it is doubtful that a parable would paint such a long time span and so many distinct events with so wide a brush. That would seem to be especially true of this parable, whose narrative is a simple, nightly activity performed by a shepherd.

12 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 255.

13 Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 1010-1015.

14 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1959), pp. 284-288.

15 Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 163-168.

sequence of events outlined in the Olivet discourse, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it must be placed at the second advent. Note the verses in Matthew:

24:30-31: At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

25:31-32: When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Both passages begin by describing the second advent. Then, since the wording in 24:30-31 implies that the gathering of the elect follows immediately upon Christ's return, there is a similar implication in 25:31-32 that the gathering of all nations before him likewise follows immediately upon his return. Those premillenarians like Gundry who take Matt. 25:31-46 as a reference to the great white throne judgment apply the principle of prophetic foreshortening¹⁶ to verses 31 and 32, but in the context of 24:30-31, this interpretation seems forced.

Step 2

From the standpoint of premillennialism, step 1 leaves only two choices: take Matt. 25:31-46 to be a separate, limited judgment, as in dispensationalism, or take it to be simply a parable depicting the great white throne judgment. The latter approach is attended by far fewer problems.¹⁷

The Parable and Its Interpretation

What, then, are the details of the parabolic interpretation? The details are presented here under four headings.

A Qualification

It is important to note a qualification: Matt. 25:31-46 is not a parable in the strict sense of the term. A parable is an extended simile, a formal comparison between a real-life narrative taken from experience and the actual point the author of the parable wants to convey; a parable requires the interpreter to go beyond the narrative to bring out that intended meaning.¹⁸ The characters in a parable, such as the Good Samaritan, are true-to-life but are not real people.

What follows [in Matt. 25:31-46] is not really a parable, though it does

16 Foreshortening is that phenomenon found in certain places in prophetic writing whereby two or more events that will be separated in time at their fulfillment are described with no specific indication of the time lapse between them. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, II:518 defines it this way: "Presenting different incidents, widely separated in time, in a broad cosmic perspective for the purpose of spiritual admonition." Buswell prefers the term "cosmic perspective" to "prophetic foreshortening" (II:417).

17 For a detailed critique of the dispensational interpretation, see Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 165-168. Note in brief, however, that it is difficult to take this as a limited judgment, especially since it supposedly determines which living "nations" enter the millennial kingdom in their natural bodies, when the end result of the separation is stated to be either "eternal life" or "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). This verse, by contrast, accords well with Rev. 20:15.

18 Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 276-277.

contain parabolic elements. It is a very dramatic, frequently symbolic, description of the last judgment.¹⁹

The true-to-life narrative in this parable is a shepherd's nightly separation of the sheep and goats, the narrative giving a parabolic picture of the final judgment at the great white throne. The sheep and goats are in the narrative, but instead of a shepherd, we have Jesus himself playing the role. Since he is a real person, it is in this point only that the parable of the sheep and goats differs from other parables.

The Meaning of the Parable

The meaning of the parable is explained by Ladd as follows:

The clue to the meaning of the parable is Jesus' "brethren," and we have clear evidence as to its meaning. Jesus himself said that his brothers are those who do the will of the Father--Jesus' disciples (Mt. 12:50). Jesus used a parabolic incident of the nightly separation of the sheep and goats to tell his disciples that they have a mission to the nations of the world. The destiny of men will be determined by the way they treat Jesus' representatives--his brethren...The destiny of the nations will be determined by the way they respond to Jesus' representatives. This is not a program of eschatology but a practical parable of human destiny.²⁰

Now for the important question: does the interpretation of Matt. 25:31-46 as a parable solve the problem for premillennialism that verse 32 seems to create, that is, putting the final judgment at the second advent? Ladd has the following honest assessment of this question:

A final question remains to be asked. If this is the final judgment, what do we do about the millennium? There seems to be no room for it. The author is frank to admit that if we had to follow this passage as our program of prophecy, there would be no room for a millennium. I would have to be an amillennialist.

However, this is not intended to be a program of prophecy. It is a dramatic parable. Jesus knows that he is about to leave his disciples in the world with a commission to take the gospel to all nations. He is in effect saying to them, "I am entrusting the destiny of the Gentiles into your hands. Those who welcome and receive you welcome and receive me, and they will be blessed in the day of judgment. Those who reject and exclude and punish you do so to me, and it will go ill with them in the day of judgment."²¹

As a parable, then, the point during the Olivet discourse at which Jesus delivers it does not determine the exact location of the judgment it depicts in the eschatological sequence of events. To close this lengthy discourse, Jesus simply reiterates his second advent in verse 31, describing the throne on which he will sit during his millennial reign, and then gives the disciples a parable to underscore the gravity of their interadvent mission for the nations of the world--"the destiny of the nations" will rest on their response to the disciples, the Christians of this era.²²

19 Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 885.

20 Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 206.

21 George Eldon Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 101.

22 This criterion does not imply salvation through the performance of good or charitable deeds. "All parties [in the debate over this passage] acknowledge that the treatment of the 'brothers' of Christ will constitute outward evidence of inward salvation" (Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 165). Murray, "The Interadventual Period and the

Who Are the Sheep and Brothers?

The parable seems to depict three groups: the sheep, the goats, and the brothers. How, then, can it be a picture of the final judgment, which encompasses only two groups?

The dispensational view of this passage does, in fact, see the sheep, goats, and brothers as three distinct groups. However, on the view taken in this paper that the parable depicts the final judgment, if the brothers are the representatives of Christ (Christians during the interadvent period), who, then, are the sheep? Gundry offers the following answer:

It may be objected that the change from 'you' to 'these brothers of Mine' makes a distinction between the sheep and the brothers. But in this very discourse we can count no less than six shifts between the second and third persons. Cf. the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are they....Blessed are you' (Matt. 5:10,11)...Jesus does not say 'to yourselves,' for that might have implied individual self-love. And He does not say 'to one another,' because He wished to give a different emphasis. The clue that the shift in persons does not imply another group of people appears in the shift from the plural 'you' to the singular 'one.' The resultant emphasis is that a loving deed to *just a single one of Christ's most insignificant disciples* is done to Christ Himself and demonstrates true salvation [emphasis original]. With this understanding of the 'brothers,' the sheep represent the saved of all time and the goats the lost of all ages. Christ's commendation will surprise the sheep, not because they will be unaware of having ministered to one another as fellow believers, but because Christ's first statement will sound as though they have ministered to Him directly and personally.²³

Click here to read the entire paper, "[The Structure of the Olivet Discourse.](#)"

Advent: Matthew 24 and 25," pp. 397-398, gives a fuller explanation: "Any question that might arise from the criteria applied in this passage, namely, deeds of mercy and the absence of such, is a question that is not particular to this passage. Works good and evil are frequently set forth in judgment passages as the criteria in accord with which judgment will be dispensed (cf. Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6-16; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:13,14). We must not forget that the judgment that will be executed by the Son of man (cf. John 5:27; Acts 17:31) is God's final adjudication of all history and everything, good and evil, must be adjudicated...As far as the wicked are concerned, their evil works and the absence of good works must, in the nature of the case receive their retributive award...Those righteous by the faith of Christ will be saved from the penalty due to sin. But in their case, it must not be thought that works, such as deeds of mercy, will have no bearing upon the judgment meted out. Good works are the fruit and evidence of faith, and as *such* will be adjudicated. Again, good works will be rewarded in the degrees of glory bestowed (cf. 1 Cor. 3:8;14,15)."

23 Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, p. 166.