

25:31

**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 divides his sheep** It seems like we can either guess who the **sheep** are or we can ask Matthew.

“Matthew, who are the sheep?”

First, let’s identify some players here. We have three groups of people in this drama: **Sheep; Goats; Brethren** (25:40). We have this group of people known as Christ’s brethren in the passage.

*Matthew 12:47: 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?” He stretched forth His hand toward 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.*

Jesus said His brethren are those who do the will of His Father.

*Matthew 28:9 As they went to tell His disciples, Jesus met [the ladies], saying, All hail. And they came and held Him by the feet, and worshipped Him. Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell My brethren that they go into Galilee.*

So, in chapter 12 the brethren are His disciples, the ones who do the will of the Father; chapter 28, the brethren are His disciples. Right in the middle we have the term brethren being used again. We would be very foolish to decide that Matthew means something totally different.

So whoever the sheep are they are the ones who treated the believers well. We could guess, but I’d rather not. Let’s go with what Matthew already told us. That’s called being a Bible student, right?

Now, let’s talk about **the sheep**. We could guess who **the sheep** are, but let’s not do that.

*Matthew 10:5: These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost **sheep** of the house of Israel.*

*Matthew 15 Behold, a woman of Canaan, not a Jew, came out of the same coasts, and cried unto Him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and besought Him, saying, Send her away; for she cries after us. But He answered and said, to who? To the woman who is crying after Him, I am not sent but unto the lost **sheep** of the house of Israel.*

All through this passage, all through this book, Jesus has already identified **sheep**. They are Israel and the ones He is going after are the lost **sheep** of the house of Israel.

You have **sheep** who treat Christians well and are received into a kingdom. Now, what happens around the AD 70 context is you have Christians who have been told to wait for something before they leave Jerusalem (24:15). And who are these Christians going to be surrounded by in Jerusalem? Jews. So there’s some AD 70 context there. I just want you to see Jesus is careful to tell us who these folks are.

**from the goats: And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, the sheep, Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and you gave Me meat: I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink: I was a stranger, and you took Me in: Naked, and**

**you clothed Me: I was sick, and you visited Me: I was in prison, and you came unto Me. Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, and fed Thee? Or thirsty, and gave Thee drink? 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? 40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, you have done it unto Me.**

**25:41**

**Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:** Now, nothing is gained by downplaying the fire in 25:41.

I suppose the references to hell as a place of “eternal fire” (Matt. 25:41) or “burning sulfur” (Rev. 20:10) are symbolic, if for no other reason than that the demons are disembodied spirits and thus cannot be punished by fire in the literal sense. But what of that? **The purpose of imagery is to point beyond what literal language can convey.** If a literal burning by fire is bad, the reality of hell’s suffering must be immeasurably and inexpressibly worse. Even if the suffering is only mental, internal, or psychological, it is something that produces an eternal “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30).<sup>1</sup>

If fire is a symbol of what hell is, and not really fire, than how bad is it if the word they use to symbolize it is fire? So you gain nothing by saying it’s a symbol if the symbol you use to symbolize it is fire. So you gain nothing by saying it’s a symbol. It’s still awful.

“Oh, I think hell is not really fire. I mean what kind of sense would that make? I mean, people who die right now go to hell. How can you have a fire?”

The point is, even if you want to say “it’s not a real fire,” you gain nothing: if fire is a symbolic word, how bad is it to use the word fire?

**For I was hungry, and you gave Me no meat: I was thirsty, and you gave Me no drink: I was a stranger, and you took Me not in: naked, and you clothed Me not: sick, and in prison, and you visited Me not. Then shall they also answer Him, saying, Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee? Then shall the King** Jesus is talking about Himself in verse 31 when the Son of Man shall come, and He calls Himself the King. That is pretty audacious. Let’s not forget this is Tuesday night (with the Good Friday scenario) of Passion Week here. He’s about to wear a crown of thorns in 72 hours. Less than 72 hours. In two and a half days Jesus, the King of glory, is going to wear a crown of thorns and be beaten with a mock reed. And He’s going to have a sign above His cross that says, “This is the King of the Jews.” Think about how Jesus looked through that in this passage, to the day when He would come again in glory.

**say unto them, Verily I say unto you, 45 Inasmuch as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to Me. And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.** The word “hell” is not used. We’re going to call it hell because it’s fire and it’s for the wicked, so I’m going to use the normal word hell for our discussion. In verse 41 and here in verse 46 we find the idea of what we normally call “Hell.”

Please also notice that Hell is not prepared for the goats. Verse 34 says “the kingdom” was “prepared” for the “sheep”, but verse 41 says that “everlasting fire” was “prepared for the devil and his angels.” God did not intend on anyone going to the flame from the foundation of the world. No one begins their journey on earth having been destined for the fire.

---

<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of Matthew](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 544.

Then there's this idea of this **punishment**. I'm not happy about hell and I think that that's my problem. Yeah, I do. Because if God does something, it's holy.

*25:41 Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.*

*25:46 And these shall go away into **everlasting punishment**: but the righteous into life eternal.*

If you have a King James Version, one word is eternal and, one word is everlasting (both in verse 46). It's the same in the Greek; same word. So know this, if you're going to say, somehow, that the punishment is not everlasting then you also have to say that the life in the kingdom is not everlasting. We've got to be consistent.

Look, I think if we stay in this verse we're going to see that if in verse 46 the punishment is not forever then you also have to say that the life is not forever. I wish that I could say to someone, "If you are unfortunate enough that you go to the fire that the fire will go out and one day you will cease to exist" (a doctrine known as annihilationism). The problem is, I am not comfortable saying that if I go to heaven that that doesn't last forever (**life eternal**). It's the same term used for both.

Someone would say, "Well, it's not the flame that lasts forever. You're not conscious of it. It is the punishment, in its effect, that lasts forever; but you're burned up right away. So it is not "eternal conscious punishment." Well how does that work for heaven? Are you comfortable saying that? "You go to heaven but you don't really know you're there. You cease to exist." We've got to be fair with the passage, folks.

Now look, I might be wrong, but we better have a good reason why I'm wrong. I can talk to you about the prayers of saints are incense before the Lord (Revelation 8), and the torment of the wicked is incense before the Lord (Revelation 14). That is to say, it is just as pleasing for people to be in the lake of fire as it is for people to pray before the holy God of heaven. It is holy and righteous and I don't understand it, but I accept it as God's perfect will, and I don't like it. And so what do I do? Do I sit around and act embarrassed about what my Lord says? No, I give the gospel out so that less people have to go to the flame.