

“When the Son of Man Comes in Glory”

Things aren't always exactly what they seem. For example, the Bible tells us that God will work out everything that happens to us for our ultimate good. We know it's true, and yet it doesn't always seem that way. When difficult times come into our lives, maybe we or someone we love is injured or sick, it can be very hard to even imagine how that could be for our good. But again, we know it is. Things aren't always what they seem, or, as the Bible puts it, “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

The Bible also tells us that we live in the last days of this world. What we see around us in coming to an end. But that's not what it seems like, is it? When we look around us, we see things that last for a long time: mountains, sunrise and sunsets, well-constructed buildings. The people around us keep doing the same things from day to day: going to work, going to school, running errands, watching television. Sure, there are things that change, but in general, the world keeps going along as we have always known it to go along. It doesn't seem like it is any closer to coming to an end.

Week after week we confess that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, and yet week after week goes by, wickedness keeps running rampant, and we see neither Jesus nor his judgment.

Our sermon text this morning gives us a glimpse of what lies ahead. It doesn't tell us precisely when Jesus will return. It reminds us, though, that he will return, and it tells us a great deal about what his judgment will be. By faith we believe what Jesus tells us here. One day, that faith will become sight. The Son of Man will come in glory.

Jesus says, **“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. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”** There will be no mistaking what is going on when the last day comes. Jesus will return in all his glory, sitting on his throne, surrounded by countless angels.

In other words, this won't be like the first time he came, as a baby in the Bethlehem stable. Then he hid the glory that was and always is his as true God. He was born to a poor virgin mother. He was welcomed by the stable animals and a few shepherds, announced by angels, but only to those select few. At that time we might have mistaken him for any other human baby. The next time, no one will make that mistake. He calls himself the Son of Man, one of the titles Jesus uses for himself most frequently in Scripture, but it is clear that he is also true God in all his glory.

And he is the judge. His work of judging begins as he describes it with separating all people, all the nations. He will put some on his right; he calls them the sheep. The goats make up the rest, and he places them on his left. And no one is left out.

For the sheep on Jesus' right, he has amazing news. **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”** This is what the Last Day will bring for believers. The kingdom of God will no longer be obscured and hidden. This is heaven itself, to be with God, to see Jesus in his glory and to join him there.

And Jesus explains why he makes this judgment with these words: **“For 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”** This is the evidence that Jesus points to. You, sheep, my sheep, helped me when I was in need.

And the sheep respond by saying, “When? When did all of this happen? We don’t remember any of it!” And Jesus will explain that his people serve him by serving their neighbors. We help Jesus when we help people who need help.

You know as well as I do that none of the sheep lined up to Jesus’ right on that day will have lived perfect lives. None of them spent every waking moment serving and helping others. None of them spent every day going from prison to prison and soup kitchen to soup kitchen in order to make a difference. But those good works are all that Jesus will mention. That’s all that he will mention because that is all that will matter. All of the other things, all of the sins, all of the shortcomings, all of the times that we hurt or harmed or disrespected or belittled others have long since been washed away. Jesus will see only the good in his people because all of the bad has been washed clean in his blood, forgiven, and paid for.

These believers didn’t do the good works so that they could get into heaven. They did these good works because that’s what believers do. We love because he first loved us. We serve others because Jesus served us. We care for others because of the loving care that our God has lavished on us. The believers as Jesus explains don’t even remember these things. They just did them because they were the right things to do.

So this list of good works is not a recipe for us for how to get into heaven: help the sick, visit the lonely, feed the hungry, and so on. It’s a list of ways that we can let our lights shine and thank God for the forgiveness of sins that he has poured out on us in our baptisms, at his table, and in his Holy Word. These good works so often remain hidden and out of view now, but when Jesus comes in glory, he will bring them to light.

And he will also have something to say to those on his left, the goats. **“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** Nothing could be more terrifying than those words. Jesus, in all his glory, will pronounce this just judgment against those who rejected him. Go away! Depart from me. Go to where my gracious presence will not be with you. Go to a place meant for the devil and his angels. Go to the eternal fire of hell, because even though you had opportunities to serve and honor and help me, you did not.

The goats won’t remember these opportunities to serve Jesus any more than the sheep will, but for different reason. They were never concerned with serving Jesus. They were concerned with serving themselves. If they would have known the things to do in order to gain a place in heaven, they claim that they would have done it. But that is simply not the case. When all they have to hold on to are their own good works, people have nothing of which to boast before God, nothing that can withstand his judgment.

This message of eternal punishment sounds a warning for us. We dare not fall for the worldly charade that says being good is enough. We cannot balance out our sins by doing enough good works. We cannot overcome our selfishness just by trying harder. We deserve and have deserved from the moment we were conceived in our mothers’ wombs to be sat to the left of Jesus’ judgment throne and to be cast away into the fires of hell. And the only reason we are not there is because Jesus himself stepped in to rescue us. He lived the perfect life, the one that is and was sufficient for earning heaven. And he gave it up for you and for me. He suffered for us. He died for us. He rose again for us, and he will come again in glory to pronounce his final judgment.

Things are not always what they seem. Right now, we often see very little difference between Christians and non-Christians. Believers and unbelievers alike do things that help others, things that the world calls good. But only those who have been washed clean in the blood of the lamb, who have followed the Good Shepherd, do the things that he calls good. And when he comes in glory, he will take us to be with him in his glory.

The Text: Matthew 25:31–46 (NIV84)

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. ³² 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

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. ³⁵ For 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, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

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? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

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.’

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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I 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.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you 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.”