The King on His Glorious Throne

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[0:00] I wonder, what is the most amazing sight that you have ever seen?! Maybe it's something like Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, a vision of great natural beauty and power.

! Maybe it was at a sports event or a gig, maybe a stadium full of thousands of people all singing and shouting. For some of us, maybe it will be the birth of a child and the miracle of new life coming into the world.
This morning, we've just read about an event that the Bible says in some ways is like all of those things. The roaring of many waters, a crowd that no one can count coming together, the pangs of childbirth, but all added together into the power of infinity.
Friends, whatever is the most stunning thing that you have ever seen, now in your head, zoom out from it until it is a tiny dot of light on the horizon and fill the leftover space with this.
No one has ever seen anything that comes even close to the glory and majesty of what Jesus describes for us here in Matthew chapter 25.
[1:23] Whatever has blown us away in our lives here will itself be blown away when he comes in his glory and sits upon his glorious throne.

And as we'll see this morning, this vision of the future puts everything that we have ever done in this life into perspective. Now, sometimes this is said to be the third of three parables in this chapter, and that's understandable, isn't it?
Because we're in parable mode, and there is a simile there, isn't there? Jesus says it will be like a shepherd separating sheep from goats.
But if we tune in, actually, we can see that it's not another parable, but straightforward teaching.
The last two sections begin the way that parables do.
The kingdom of heaven will be like. This section begins differently. When the Son of Man comes in his glory. Then what he does is like a shepherd, but only in one sense, that he separates people from one another as if they were sheep and goats.
[2:36] But we're not to imagine here, are we, the king speaking to actual sheep and goats, but to the blessed and the cursed, verse 34 and 41.

So up until now, it's as if Jesus has been speaking to us in stories, stories, but now he closes the book and puts it down, and he looks us in the eye and speaks to us directly about what is going to happen in the future.
And so as you listen this morning, don't tuck this one away in your photo album to kind of get out now and then and look at. Put this in your diary as an event that will take place in the future of this world.
Friends, one day you will open your eyes and will see the king sitting on his glorious throne. And one last time in this gospel, Jesus wants to know, are we ready to see him?
Are we ready for that day? So three points for us this morning then, beginning with verses 31 to 33.
The king is coming to judge. Just see that with me in verse 31 and 32, again, when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.
[3:57] Before him will be gathered all the nations and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Son of Man is the way that Jesus most often refers to himself in the gospel.

So this is him returning in glory. It's also, as we heard in Daniel, a title that we find in the Old Testament, one like a Son of Man goes up to God and as we heard is given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.
So it is that Son of Man who Daniel predicted, Jesus himself, coming down from heaven in his glory to bring that kingdom that all nations might serve him.

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And as he takes his seat on his glorious throne, notice how all creation seems to kind of converge upon him. He comes with all the angels with him. Before him will be gathered all the nations. Heaven is emptied. The earth is gathered at his feet. It's as if the universe is holding its breath, waiting for his word. And then he will begin to separate people, one from another.
[5:19] Now I wonder if we think or imagine that that will be Jesus' priority when he comes again. Number one on his list, judgment. Is that what King Charles spends his day doing?

No, but it is the priority of kings in the Bible to uphold justice in the land. Remember, if you can, Solomon and the two prostitutes who come to him, both claiming that the baby was theirs.
They came before the king to settle it. And when Solomon gave his judgment, we read, all Israel stood in awe of the king because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.
Of course, there was a justice system involving lots of people, but the buck stopped with the king. If justice wasn't being done, it was down to him to do something about it.
And so this is part of God's blueprint from the Old Testament that when the king takes his throne, he will begin with judgment. And he will judge not only his people, but all nations.
[6:30] He is a king for the world to bow to. Now, I think we instinctively shrink away from this idea of one person judging everyone who has ever lived.

We don't want to be judged. And why should anyone be judged? But we know, even as we sit here this morning, that there is much in this world that needs to be put right.
Think about the violence that we read about in the news almost every day, whether in faraway war zones or closer to home. A few weeks ago, there was a news story about a man who had been stabbed to death with a screwdriver trying to protect his granddaughter from a woman who'd come into the home.
And we can't wrap our heads around that, can we? Think of the Epstein files, grooming gangs, the exploitation of women in migrant camps in Calais.
Think of the anger online, the radicalization of people's minds, the scams, the fake news, the images. And that doesn't even scratch the surface, does it, of all the wrong that is being done throughout the world right now, let alone in history.
[7:51] Friends, when we read that and see that around us, do our hearts not cry out for a righteous king to come and sit in just judgment over the earth, to seek out all the wrongs that have been lost in the mists of time and give a true and a final verdict on each and every one?

Jesus says that that will happen and he will be the one to do it. And it will involve people being separated. It was Gandhi who famously said, hate the sin, love the sinner.
And there's certainly truth in that, isn't there? Jesus himself teaches us to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, but in the end, we can't draw such a firm line, can we, between what is done and the one who does it?
In the end, the king will hold each of us responsible for what we have done and not done. But does God not love the world, we say, so how can he judge the world?
Well, Peter says in his second letter that time in this world is a measure of God's patience with us. He's not slow, he says, to do what he said, but is patient with you, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should reach repentance.
[9:12] In love, he sent his one and only son into the world that whoever would believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life. In his great patience, he allows us time to turn from our sin and trust in Christ and be saved.

But patience is not the same as indifference, is it? Patience means a delayed response, not no response.
Jesus is clear that when he comes again, it will not be to call people to himself to be saved, but to separate those who have trusted in him from those who haven't and bring every deed under his judgment.
And if we still struggle with the idea of Jesus doing that, he gives us a surprising but a helpful image, doesn't he? What does he say it will be like? It will be like a shepherd.
A shepherd. Now, don't we love to think of Jesus as a shepherd, the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep? Jesus here reminds us that he is that same shepherd, but that distinction, separation, is part of his pastoral work.
[10:28] Shepherds back then had two tools, a crook and a staff, a crook to pull the sheep close to the shepherd to protect them, and a staff to beat away predators from the sheep.

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It was the shepherd who stood between his sheep and what would harm them, the shepherd who called out his sheep from the flocks grazing on the hillside, the shepherd who separated the sheep from the goats.
And if Jesus does not separate out his sheep in the end, well, it doesn't mean much that he laid down his life for them. He laid down his life for his sheep so that he could call them out, save them from harm, and gather them into his eternal kingdom.
Friends, if you're a Christian here this morning, Jesus will separate you and gather you from the world because he loves you and has freed you from your sins by his blood.
He will judge the earth because he loves his people and he hates the harm and abuse that has fallen upon them. Friends, Jesus gives us wonderful news this morning that the king will come again to judge.
[11:41] And as we sang earlier from Psalm 98, on that day, heaven and nature will sing and we will praise him for his perfect justice and love. But there is more than one outcome of his judgment and the rest of our passage kind of looks at those two outcomes and responses in turn.

So secondly, Jesus says on that day, some will inherit eternal life. Have a look there at verse 34. And the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.
Now I did think for a moment about doing a kind of compare and contrast with the blessed and the cursed, but I actually think it's significant that Jesus speaks to the blessed his people first.
That's also the order in the parables. So the first parable, it's the five wise bridesmaids who go into the banquet before the bridegroom speaks to the five foolish ones.
In the second parable, it's the good and faithful servants that the master commends before he condemns the wicked and lazy servant. And so here, it's the sheep who Jesus welcomes first before turning to the goats.
[13:05] I think that should reassure us if we're feeling uneasy or anxious about that day that the stress here is on Jesus gathering and saving those who have loved him and waited eagerly for him.

He is not going to try and catch us out or test us one last time. No, he's doing this for us to save us into his kingdom and welcome us into his joy.
That's what we're looking forward to, isn't it? To hear our Lord and Savior say to us, come in. Come in. He says they are blessed by the Father, that the Father smiles upon us as we approach him.
Maybe some of you visited family or friends over Christmas or New Year. It's one of the best feelings, isn't it, to pull up outside the house and be greeted with warm smiles, hugs, handshakes. Come in. Come in. Make yourself at home. It's great that you're here. Come in, you who make the Father's face light up.
[14:19] Come in, you on whom the Father smiles. Make yourselves at home. We'll find out why in a moment, but before we do, I wonder if you noticed in verse 34 how long this moment has been prepared for.

What does Jesus say? Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. How long?
All of time. See what he's saying? This is the moment that God was preparing for when he created the heavens and the earth in the beginning. This is the kingdom he had in mind when he told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth to subdue it and have dominion over it.
These are the children whom he loved and chose when he spoke about the offspring of the woman whose name was Life, Eve, who would be in conflict with the offspring of the serpent.
Friends, for all the chaos and confusion of our world and our lives, our families, our church, we can cling to this promise, can't we, that what God began in the beginning, he will bring to completion in the end.
[15:32] That God has had the last day of this world planned from the first day of creation. And nothing since then or in between can get in the way of him fulfilling his eternal purposes for his people in the world that he has made.

We've thought quite a lot over the last few weeks about us needing to be prepared prepared for that day. But how wonderful, how wonderful is it to be reminded by Jesus this morning that before and behind any preparation that we have made is the preparation that God has made for us.
He has prepared for us a kingdom from before the beginning of time. Christ has gone before us to prepare a room for us in the Father's house.

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what an incredible joy to find that after all our getting ready for that day that he has got ready for us a place in his kingdom from the foundation of the world.
So why then are we welcomed in to his eternal kingdom? Well, Jesus tells us this in verse 35. For, he says, I was hungry and you gave me food.
[16:53] I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.

So it is those who have loved Christ and shown it by serving the very least of his brothers and sisters who inherit his kingdom. For in doing so to them, says Jesus, they have served him.
Sometimes Christians can trip up on these verses about who the least are that Jesus speaks about. Clearly, unequivocally, it's a good thing, isn't it, for us to help those who are hungry and thirsty and strangers and naked, whoever they are.
But it would be a pretty big surprise and a twist at this point in Matthew's gospel, wouldn't it, if what got us into the kingdom of heaven was things like running food banks and volunteering for charity, as good as those things might be.
The clue that that's not what Jesus is saying is that he says that what we have done for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did to me. So it's how we've treated Jesus' people that is how we've treated him, which is both a profound encouragement and a profound challenge.
[18:14] The profound encouragement is that even the least of his people are so united to the risen and reigning Lord Jesus that he considers service of them service of him.

And his actions back up his words. If you remember on the road to Damascus, Jesus appears to Saul and he says to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?
Saul, bewildered, Lord, who are you? I am Jesus. He says, who you are persecuting. You are persecuting my weak and vulnerable brothers and sisters, so you are persecuting me, he says.
And of course, the rest is history. You might feel least or littlest in church this morning for any number of reasons. You might not have very much.
You might struggle to keep the heating on in weather like this. You might be young or weak in your faith. You might be unwell, feeling worn out and weary. You might feel like a stranger and not quite at home or not quite welcome here.
[19:26] Know, brothers and sisters, that the Lord Jesus sympathizes with you in your weakness. And indeed, he counts our service of you to be service of him.

But that's also a profound challenge, isn't it? To be clear, Jesus is not saying that serving other Christians in church is how we are saved into his kingdom.
No, he's saying if we are united to him, then we won't be able to resist serving those others who are united to him, whoever they are. Did you notice how unaware, oblivious even, the blessed are that that's what they've been doing all this time?
When did we feed you, Lord? When did we give you a drink or clothe you and visit ye? They haven't been doing it to get extra credit with Jesus, have they?
This is just how they've gone about their lives, thinking little or nothing of it, because their love for others has flowed out of their evergreen love for Christ.
[20:30] And the challenge for us as believers, therefore, is to what extent can you say that of yourself this morning? My love for the Lord Jesus is seen in the way that I serve the least of his brothers and sisters.

Now I take it every Christian will be able to say that that is true, up to a point. But at what point does your love run out? Or perhaps does your love for Christ outstrip your service of others so that your Christian life is unbalanced, more inward piety than whole life discipleship?
Or do you do more for others to disguise that actually your love for Christ is small and grown cold over time? Friends, the challenge of the blessed response isn't so much whether we love and serve Christ or not, but whether we can say so clearly and confidently that our real love for Jesus is evident in our real service of his people, and especially the least among us.
Do we remember those who are persecuted for the faith in other parts of the world? Do we try and find ways to serve and bless those who have less than us in church?
Do we encourage and include those whose decision to follow Christ as cost them their family or friendships, relationships? Do we reach out to those who may be strangers and don't know anyone when they walk in?

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[22:09] Do we visit those who are sick and housebound or lonely and isolated? In doing so, friends, we are serving Christ, which is the greatest honor of all, and the clearest evidence says Jesus that we belong to him and to his kingdom.

And so, those blessed by the Father, you will be welcomed in to the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. But that is not the only outcome of Jesus' judgment.
There is one other outcome, which we see from verse 41 onwards. Some will depart into eternal punishment. Now, we can see at a glance that these verses are the mirror image of the last section. It's the same thing in a way, but in reverse, isn't it? So, see verse 41. Then he will say to those on his left, depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.
So, these people are sent away from Jesus to a place that has also been prepared, yet not for them, but for the devil and his angels.
[23:26] And again, we're back to Genesis 3 and that age-old conflict, aren't we, between the serpent's spiritual descendants and the woman's spiritual descendants. Well, says Jesus, it is this day when that conflict will finally be at an end.

There is a place prepared for the punishment of the devil and his demons. Remember, the legion of demons who confront Jesus, the man possessed by the legion, and they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss.
Well, this is what they were afraid of. But Jesus tells us chillingly that that place will also be for the devil's spiritual descendants.
You are of your father, the devil, he said to the religious leaders of his day. And Jesus soberly is clear that that group will include those who thought that they would be welcomed into his kingdom. Because despite what they say, they have not given him food and drink for his hunger and thirst, not clothed or welcomed him, visited him in sickness or persecution.
[24:39] And just like the blessed are oblivious to the ways that they have served him, while the cursed are equally oblivious to the ways that they haven't. Then they will also answer saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or in prison or sick and not minister to you?

Of course, Lord, we would have served you if you'd been here. If only we'd had the chance, Lord, but where were you for us to feed and clothe you and visit you? And Jesus tells them, verse 45, truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.
Just as naturally as the blessed did serve the least of Jesus' disciples, so naturally the cursed did not. Both sets of people have thought nothing of it in their life.
But Jesus thinks everything of it. It is a world of difference to him whether we have seen him dwelling in the least of his people and so loved and served them as we would love and serve him. Indeed, it's on the basis of that evidence that he sends these cursed away into eternal punishment and the blessed into eternal life.
[26:01] Now, if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here this morning, it's important to hear Jesus correct a common misunderstanding about hell here.

I think most people are okay with the idea of there being a hell as long as it's for mass murderers and dictators. But Jesus says here, doesn't he, the bar is much, much lower than that.
The people he sends away into eternal fire are not people who've done terrible things, but people who haven't done what we might think of as pretty small things.
Not looking out for people in church who have little, not remembering those who languish in prison for the gospel. Why would Jesus send people to hell for that?
Well, because getting eternal life is not a question of what we have or haven't done, but whether we have loved Jesus and so lived for him.
[27:05] Our unexciting, ordinary service of one another is actually a great measure of that because it doesn't feel or look very special or important here and now, does it? It's not going to get you a promotion or an award, but it is very much seen and known by him and will be rewarded in the end.

And so, friends, let me gently but clearly with Jesus this morning say that if you don't love the Lord Jesus, you haven't put your faith in him and you're not living for him, you will not get into heaven. Everything that you do and don't do counts for nothing if you don't belong to him. Only what is done for him and for his kingdom will be recognized and rewarded in the end.

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So let me urge you, if that's you today, to take that to heart. Not to let these words pass by you, but to turn, to do something, to take hold of Christ, the judge, who had God's judgment fall on him on the cross for all the ways that we have fallen short in our lives.
If we trust in his work to save us and to gain us entry into his kingdom forever, it is still not too late. There is time to turn, to trust, to be saved.
[28:32] And finally, those of us who would say we have done that, well, is that seen in the way that you love his people? Or to turn it around, do you see him in his people and so love him by serving them?

If the answer, honestly, is no, I don't, please, friends, do not imagine, do not fool yourselves into thinking that Jesus, the glorious king, will wait to hear your reasons on the last day.
Simply do not let your answer to that question be no, or his answer will be what it is here, depart from me, depart from me. And friends, the best way of ensuring that that is not your answer on that day is to change your answer today, to turn to him as your savior, bow to him as your Lord, serve him with joy by serving the least of his people gladly.
Jesus' teaching ends in an incredibly stark place, two ways to live, two final destinations, both last forever, and the only difference between them is him.
We do not know the day or hour that we will stand before him, so get ready now, he says, and stay ready. That's been his message throughout these chapters of Matthew, hasn't it?
[30:04] And so, one last time in these chapters, are you ready for the day that you will stand before the Lord Jesus in his glory? Friends, time to wake up, stay awake, get ready, for he will return.

Let's pray that we would be prepared together. together. Father, we thank you for your gracious warnings in your word about the judgment, the just and the righteous judgment that you will bring on all the earth.
And we confess again that if we were to stand before you and you were to count our sins, oh Lord, we could not stand. But how we praise and thank you for your forgiveness, which is full and free through your son, Jesus.
How we thank you that the one that you raised from the dead to be the judge of the earth is the one who died under your judgment for our sins and for our guilt.
And so, Lord, we pray, those of us who are not yet in him, Lord, how we ask that you, by your spirit, would turn them today to Jesus, that they would be united with him by faith and begin to live for him and serve him.
[31:25] And Father, at the beginning of a new year, we pray for those of us who are us that it would be seen more and more in our life and conduct, that you would stir us up to love and good works, that we would be a people who are known for our love for you and love for one another.

Lord, prepare us, we ask, for that coming day. Do not let us fall asleep, but have us stay awake. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.
Amen.

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