

The Final Gathering of the Flock

by John MacDuff

The sermon explores the final gathering of the flock, emphasizing the Shepherd's name, retinue, and address to the sheep, as well as the separation and criterion for judgment.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, Matthew 25:31, Matthew 25:34, Matthew 25:41, Matthew 25:46, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Hebrews 9:27, James 2:14, Revelation 22:12

Topics: "Day Of Judgment", "Eternal Consequences"

Description

John MacDuff preaches about the profound imagery of Christ as the Great Shepherd leading His flock through various life experiences, culminating in the Day of Judgment. He emphasizes the significance of Christ being both the Son of man and the King, highlighting the personal interest each individual has in this future event. The sermon delves into the separation of the righteous and the wicked, the Shepherd's address to the sheep, and the eternal consequences based on works of love and charity. MacDuff urges listeners to prepare for the inevitable Day of Judgment, where the Shepherd-King will welcome the righteous into the kingdom prepared for them, while the unrighteous face eternal separation and condemnation.

Transcript

We have just had our thoughts directed to the beautiful inspired picture of the Shepherd conducting His flock through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The next delineation of Christ's pastoral relation to His Church and people is a pre-eminently sublime one. The Shepherd-love and leadings of the wilderness are at no end. Earth's diverse experiences- its green pastures and still waters- its rough and rugged paths- its places of temptation- its lairs of wild beasts- its cloudy and dark days- and the Valley of death-shade terminating all- these are over and past.

The flock is now seen on the Great day of Judgment, as depicted in the magnificent imagery of the passage which heads this chapter- a passage which stands almost unrivaled in sacred Scripture for its pathos and grandeur. Viewing Christ as the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, the time and circumstances in which He uttered the words are remarkable. It was but a few days previous to the fulfillment of the awful prophetic announcement, "Awake O sword, against my Shepherd!" when the Shepherd was to be smitten, and the sheep to be scattered.

He was now seated, with His disciples, on the brow of the Mount of Olives, over against the temple, mingling predictions of the doom of Jerusalem with delineation's of the end of the world and the great

assize. Possibly on some of the slopes of that mountain, or down in one of the ravines at their feet, His eye may have fallen on one of the many flocks of sheep and goats that were wont to browse on its pastures. The scene is suggestive. It affords an apposite symbol to illustrate those themes on which He had just been discoursing.

That flock of mingled sheep and goats, with their shepherd seated on one of the grassy knolls or rocky eminences hard by, forms an impressive parable and picture of the hour, when the Almighty Shepherd, so soon to be smitten by the sword of Justice, and to give His own life for the sheep, should appear in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, to dispense the awards of unerring equity to the countless multitudes "gathered before Him." A volume would be needed to exhaust the topics embraced in this stupendous description of the Shepherd-judge: we can do no more than sketch a feeble outline.

But as we do so, let it be under the impressive conviction, that it is a scene in which each one of us has an individual and solemn interest. It contains the story of our future. This chapter will be to each one of us yet, matter of personal history. Oh, how do all other events dwindle into insignificance, when brought side by side with "that Day!" How do all other facts seem tame and unimportant compared with this! "So then, every one of us must give account of himself to God."

In taking, then, a cursory glance of the passage, let us note THE SHEPHERD'S NAME. It is twofold. He is called "The Son of man," (v.34), "when the Son of man shall come in His glory." In that scene of unutterable majesty, when the Heavens and Earth are fleeing away, and there is no place for them; when the trumpet of the archangel is sounding, and the cry of ten thousand times ten thousands is heard, "He comes! He comes! to judge the earth." When the eye, in trembling emotion, is lifted to see who this august Being can be, whose approach is thus heralded- Lo, it is the son of man!

The glorified humanity of the Christ of Nazareth stands, as it were, in bold relief in the foreground of the picture. If we could imagine the myriad ranks breaking the silence of the scene with a burst of praise, it would be in the old prophetic words - "A Man" is "an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest!" How often is this encouraging truth, not only of Jesus being our Judge, but our Judge as the Son of man, unfolded to us in Scripture, both by our blessed Lord himself, and by His inspired apostles.

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." "The Father has committed all judgment unto the Son." "He has given Him power to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of man." "He has appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he has ordained." Precious assurance! That when startled from the long sleep of ages by the final trumpet, the first object that shall arrest the gaze of the of the rising dead will be "the living Kinsman" - the Brother in our nature, - the once helpless One of Bethlehem - the wearied One of Sychar - the tempted One of Gethsemane - the weeping One of Bethany - the suffering One of Calvary!

The Savior of the Throne of Judgment will be the very Savior we formerly loved and trusted on the Throne of Grace. How shall every jewel of the crown about to be bestowed on us be augmented in value by the thought - "It is given by JESUS!" The whisper will circulate through the throng of the ransomed, as they gaze on their Judge, "He loved me, and gave Himself for me." But there is yet another title given here to the Shepherd. It is a royal one - (v.34). "Then shall the KING say unto them" - and as a King (it is said in verse 31), "He shall come in His glory," - and to "sit on the throne of His glory."

It is the only passage in His Gospels where He assumes the name and title of King. The Shepherd and the Fold for the moment melt from the view, and we see a Monarch seated on His tribunal or judgment-seat.

The rod and staff have dropped from His hand, - and the scepter of equity takes their place. He is about to pronounce a regal sentence- the insignia of royalty are around Him- He has "prepared His throne for judgment." He is about, not only for Himself to enter on His final mediatorial reign and kingdom, but also to grant to His ransomed Church investiture with their royal rights and prerogatives.

"The children of Zion are joyful in their KING." On His vesture and on His thigh is seen written, "King of kings, and Lord of lords." What that glory here spoken of is to be, it is not for us to conjecture or attempt to depict. We may believe it will far transcend our present feeble comprehension. The universe will accumulate its rarest treasures to enhance the magnificence of that advent, and to swell the shout of jubilant welcome. If creation hid her face in darkness at the hour of the crucifixion, - if the reeling earth was convulsed in paroxysms [a sudden explosive burst of emotion] of anguish and the sun put sackcloth on his disc, at the spectacle of that shameful death, - shall not that creation, which thus mourned His humiliation and suffering, array herself in holiday-attire to grace His triumph? - Putting off her sackcloth, shall she not be girded with gladness, to the end that her glory may sing praise to her Redeemer Lord, and not be silent?

What a contrast! - that once buffeted and forsaken Man, whose infant dwelling was canopied by the rude rafters of a Judean stable- whose unpillowed head was often denied the meanest shelter afforded to beast or bird- whose scepter was the rod of mockery, and His only throne the bitter cross- What a contrast with the king, on whose head shall be "many crowns," and whose hand shall grasp the rod and scepter of universal empire! The lofty summons of the Psalmist will then receive its full response - "Make a joyful noise before the Lord, THE KING! for He comes to judge the earth; with righteousness shall He judge the world, and the people with equity." "Your THRONE, O God, is forever and ever!"

We have next to note HIS RETINUE [His followers] (v.31). "All the holy angels with Him." These blessed beings are represented as profoundly interested in the gradual unfolding of the plan of redemption. When the amazing scheme was first broached in the counsels of Heaven, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." During the process and development of the mediatorial kingdom on earth, either singly or in groups and companies, they came down to visit the theater of the coming Savior's sufferings. A vast throng congregated at the lawgiving on Sinai- "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels; the Lord is among them as in Sinai, in the holy place." We read of "a multitude of the heavenly host" praising God in the plains of Bethlehem. In these and similar instances, however, we have only (so to speak) delegates and representatives from the great celestial army. But, on this great Day, "all His holy angels" are to be with Him. Dominions, principalities, powers, are for the time to vacate their thrones to crowd the firmament of judgment. He is to "call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people." With what delight will these blessed Beings respond to the invitation, "Let us be glad and rejoice, for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife has made herself ready." If they came, with joyful alacrity, to sustain the adorable Sufferer on the mount of temptation- to wipe the blood-drops from His brow in Gethsemane, - to guard His vacant sepulcher, and pronounce the victory of Redemption achieved, - with what gladness will they go forth on His great Coronation-day, with the sound of their trumpets, to gather in His elect from the four winds of Heaven! Angels constitute the brilliant retinue of the Great Judge - His assessors on the final Day of reckoning.

Our attention is next called to the throng ranged in front of His tribunal (v.32). "Before Him shall be gathered ALL NATIONS." What a convocation! not one missing of the countless millions. All that have ever lived - from Adam to the last of the human family. We have read in history, sacred and profane, of vast assemblages of human beings. The hosts of Israel as they mustered on the night of the Exodus- the

mighty concourse of the Hebrew nation, as Solomon dedicated his temple, - this same Mount of Olives, where Christ delivered the words we are now considering, densely thronged to its summit with the awe-struck worshipers.

We have read of the hosts of Xerxes and Alexander, of the invading hordes, - the figurative locust-multitudes of Alaric and Attila. But what are these, and many others? Insignificant nothings, in comparison with the ranks of this multitudinous army who have in a moment burst from their graves, their pulses beating with immortality! The sea shall give up its dead - the thousands who filled its caverns in the days of the flood - the millions who, since that time, have in every age been gathered into its rapacious holds by storm and tempest- proud hosts, which like Pharaoh's, perished in the waves- the crews of stranded navies- and the lonely wasted invalid, who has been let down, in slow, solemn burial over the ship's side, - the rippling waters chiming his requiem!

The Earth shall give us its dead- the tenants of the unknown, and unnoted heaps of the village churchyard, - those whose winding-sheet has been the snows of the mountain, or who lie uncoffined in the mounds of the battle-field- kings and princes from their pyramids and cenotaphs. Earth and sea shall seem like two gigantic mausoleums ; the buried dust of all ages and all climes, so long in their custody, shall be gathered, molded, re-adjusted- disembodied spirits hastening to re-inhabit their new resurrection-tabernacles.

"All nations!" Egypt with her crouching slaves - the children of Edom and the children of Abraham- the millions of Babylon and Assyria - martial Rome with a vassal world at her feet - Greece waking up from the dreams of her false philosophy - rude Savages of the hyperborean regions bursting their ice-bound tombs- barbaric Pagan tribes from the climes of the Sun, - hordes of cannibals from the Isles of the Pacific, - roving tribes from the forests and prairies of the far west, - Britain with her million-peopled cities, and the children of her gigantic colonies - and thus, all at once and together - "the dead, small and great, shall stand before God."

Yes, and more solemn than all - as has already been observed, the eyes which now trace these pages shall gaze on the unutterable majesty of the descending Judge. These ears shall listen to that trumpet peal - these feet swell the tread of these deathless thousands! Observe, next in order, THE SEPARATION (v.32). "He shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats." To understand this figure aright, we must bear in remembrance that in Palestine, the long hairy wool of the sheep makes the animal so similar in appearance to the goat, that an unpracticed eye, in looking at the flock browsing on the same meadow, would be at a loss to distinguish between them.

But the discriminating shepherd has not such difficulty- he can tell at a glance "the one from the other;" and before folding them for the night, can easily effect their separation. So it is with the Great Shepherd and Bishop of souls. At present, in this our earthly condition, the sheep and goats; believers and unbelievers; righteous and wicked; good and bad; are so intermingled, that often the most discriminating human eye cannot detect the difference. The tare, or spurious wheat, mingles with the true grain.

The hypocrite and formalist, under the mask of religious profession, passes for the true Christian- separation is often impossible. But on that Day, the final separation shall take place. The possibility of pretense and appearance will be at an end. The shibboleth [a distinguishing mark] of party will be heard no more. Here on earth, we have the Church of Christ split up and severed into endless divisions, - those of "Paul, and those of Apollos, and those of Cephas." We have society, too, with its conventional grades

and distinctions- rich and poor, master and servant, learned and unlearned.

There will then be two, and only two classes- the sheep and the goats - the wheat and the chaff - the vessels unto honor, and the vessels unto dishonor - those who are Christ's people, and those who are not - those who love Baal, and those who love God. "He shall set the sheep upon his right hand, and the goats upon the left." Each shall stand in his own lot at the end of the days. There will be no middle ground- no place for compromise. Between the two separated multitudes "there is a great gulf fixed."

We have next, THE SHEPHERD'S ADDRESS TO THE SHEEP - the King's welcome to His Church (v.34). "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you, from the foundation of the world." "Come!" What music in that word! It is the old, blessed, gospel utterance to which they first listened in the depths of ruin and despair, when sin-burdened and sorrow-burdened, - "Come unto me, all you that labor, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

As that word was His first invitation of love in the day of espousals, so it is His last invitation and welcome in this day of final triumph. He spoke it from the cross, He now speaks it from the throne! It is taken up by the concentric ranks of surrounding angels. All Heaven echoes and bids the ransomed welcome. "Come!" It contains the essence of their Heaven: for it tells those who they are to be the sharers and companions of His own glory. What if he had slightly altered the formula?

What, if, instead of "You blessed ones, Come," He had said rather, "You blessed ones, Go, to a kingdom I have provided for you. Angels, conduct from My presence this ransomed people I have redeemed. Furnish them with crowns and thrones in that distant celestial city; and since I am to be no longer with them, be you to them a holy brotherhood, - make them partakers of your joys!" How would ever face droop in sadness! Heaven would have a blight passed over it. Its ransomed worshipers would exclaim - "Our thrones are denuded of their glory - our crowns of their luster, O Savior, without You!"

But it is not so. His very opening declaration dispels their dread. "Come!" Wherever your heaven is, it is to be a heaven with ME: we are to share our crowns and thrones together. "Him that overcomes will I grant to sit with Me on My throne." "Enter you into THE JOY OF YOUR LORD." And in connection with this invitation, observe further, the Heritage bestowed, "Inherit the Kingdom." He is seated on that throne as a Shepherd-King, and it is a kingdom that is His gift. We have spoken elsewhere of heaven as the many mansions of the Father's house.

But now it is joint-kingly inheritance with Himself, the elder Brother. By virtue of their adoption in to the covenant family, they are heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. Nor is the investiture with these mighty and amazing privileges any sudden and capricious mark of the divine favor. It is a kingdom which has been "prepared for them from the foundation of the world." God had destined them, from all eternity, for surpassing honors. He is only now fulfilling the purpose of His own infinite, everlasting love.

As the fond mother, in the prospect of welcoming her absent son from a distant land, has his chamber bedecked and furnished with every memorial and souvenir which love and affection can devise, - so has God, the Infinite Father of His people, been providing for the reception of His long absent children. He has been "preparing" a kingdom fitted to meet and satisfy the amplest longings and aspirations of their immortal natures. "I saw," says John, "the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband!"

We shall now enter on the awful antithetical portion of this passage, when the Judge of mankind turns to the left hand to pronounce sentence on the wicked. "Depart," He says. And in that one word, lies the fearful element of their condemnation. They are banished from His presence. The "Come" of the righteous, stands in marked contrast with this exile of the unrighteous. "Depart, you cursed!" what a saying to issue from the lips of supreme Benignity, Kindness, and Love! It is the first and the last curse of Christ.

It is the first and last malediction uttered by Him, whose mission was "not to destroy men's lives but to save them." And their doom is everlasting- "everlasting fire." Men may torture that expression as they may, to extract a limited and modified meaning. They may try to reason themselves into a less gloomy theology. But the Word of God in too many unmistakable passages closes their lips. "These shall go away into everlasting punishment." "He that is filthy, let him be filthy still."

"Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire, - who shall dwell with everlasting burnings!" And yet once more - Observe the great judicial principle in the awards of the Shepherd-Judge. It is the works of those at His tribunal. The test enunciated is - "Inasmuch as you did it," or "inasmuch as you did it not." Justified by faith, they are to be sifted, proved, and judged by deeds. It is those who, in the first instance, have found pardon and peace in the efficacious merits and sacrifice of the Divine Redeemer, - who have sat under the shadow of His cross, and exulted in the assurance that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin, - to whom He will address this invitation - 'Come, inherit the blood-bought kingdom!'

But He thinks also of the cup of cold water - the clothing of the poor - the sheltering of the orphan - as being evidences of love to Himself- or He thinks of the evading of all these works of mercy by the selfish professor, as the too truthful test of the lack of that love. "I," says He, "am the sick One - the homeless One - the naked One - the captive One- you did it - or you did it not to ME!" Let us remember this; it is "charity" in the true sense of the word, - love to God, generating all those loving virtues, of which love is the parent, which will decide our final bliss or woe.

Religion, if true, can never be quenched in an unloving, selfish life. The criterion on "that day" will not be, what we have well said, but what we have well done! Semblances will be nothing then- party distinctions will be nothing then- appearing to be a Christian will be nothing then- flaming orthodoxy, the most evangelical creed in Christendom, apart from a loving nature, will be nothing then. It will be doers alone who will be justified. The demand will be, "Show me your faith by your works."

Not that these works will unlock the gates of heaven. God forbid! In themselves, and as pleas of merit, they will be but "wood, and hay, and stubble." It is evident in this passage, and well worth noting, that from the righteous expressing their astonishment at the Judge's commendation, - they at least deemed these works and charities utterly valueless as a ground of justification and acquittal. "We your sheep," they seem to say to their Shepherd, "what have we done?" But Christ does see, and does accept, what has been by them done to His people, as if it had been done to Himself.

"He commends not the works as such, but the love which prompted them." And when He turns to those on His left hand, who are destitute of all such evidences of life and love, it is as if He said, "You have been selfish, and niggardly, and unfeeling, and avaricious- you cannot have kept the first table of the law, and loved your God, seeing you have broken the second to your brother." "Be no deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap." The theme of this chapter, of which we have given the feeblest outline, is a most solemn one.

The oldest recorded preacher, - in the oldest recorded sermon, takes this very subject for his text and discourse. "Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these saying, Behold the Lord comes with ten thousand of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them, of all their ungodly deed which they have ungodly committed." Every fresh age should give augmented emphasis to these words of thrilling warning. Each day we live, the shadow of that Throne is deepening on our path- the noise of the approaching chariot-wheels becomes more audible.

"Yet a little while," (and that 'little while' is becoming less every day), "and He that shall come, will come and will not tarry." Are we ready to meet Him? Are we ready for the "Come" of welcome? Could we say in looking upwards to His advent-throne, "Lo! This is our God, we have waited for Him!" Would He be to us the true Melchizedek, King of Salem, come to bless? Or, terrible alternative! Have we no portion in that advent-scene but the curse and the depart! Despise that first "Come" of pardon and love - and the second "Come" of welcome cannot be ours.

Reject the Savior on the Throne of Grace, and when the Throne of Judgment is set, and the books are opened, there can be no more blessings. The reign of mercy is over. The priestly intercession is at an end. The prayer for the cumbering fig-tree, "spare it" - is no longer heard- the pleading Voice is silenced- the door is shut. The Shepherd can no longer gather- the Shepherd's crook can no longer rescue- these terrible words alone linger on the Shepherd's lips - "You are not of my sheep!"

Great God, avert us from such a doom! Gather us to Your fold of grace, before we be overtaken by the hour of eternal separation! "The Lord grant unto us, that we may find mercy of the Lord on THAT DAY!"

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