

## **The Sheep and Goats: The Reality of Heaven and Hell**

by Brant Pitre July 31, 2020

Now that's the basic thrust of the parable here.

What about the Old Testament reading? How does this link up with the first reading for today? Well if you go back here, it is a very famous prophecy from the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 34, Ezekiel himself gives a kind of parable of the divine shepherd. He is describing the future age of salvation using the metaphor of God as a shepherd. And this is what he says:

For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And then it skips down a few verses:

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice. "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, rams and he-goats.

So notice that. Where did Jesus get this image of the judgment as a division between sheep and goats? He got it from the Old Testament. He got it from Ezekiel 34. And this prophecy reveals something extremely important about God — I really want to stress this — the image of God as the shepherd doesn't just mean that he is the final judge — like the shepherd judges between the sheep and the goats and divides them. That is true, but it also implies, in some ways even more importantly, that as a shepherd he has the sheep's best interest in mind. In other words, he himself, he says, is going to seek out the loss. He's going to seek out the strayed. He is going to bind up the crippled, because that's what a shepherd does. He tries to save his sheep, so that if they get lost, if they get scattered, he brings them back to the flock. So the image of God as a shepherd shows that not only does God call us to love him and to love one another, but that he loved us first, that he sought us out first. That when it comes to salvation, God was seeking us long before we ever sought him. That's the fundamental imagery here. In fact, it is kind of interesting, in the Revised Standard Version translation it says "I will rescue them on a day of clouds and thick darkness." That image is really powerful because if you think about the New Testament, what is the day of clouds and thick darkness? Well it's Good Friday. It's the day when there is darkness for three hours, from noon until 3 o'clock, when Jesus gives up his life on the cross in the crucifixion. That's how God rescues us. He rescues us through the cross.

And that's why, you can see, the Responsorial Psalm for today is the famous Psalm 23. What's the Psalm?

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;  
he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.  
Now look at what it says here:  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

So notice how that Psalm ends, it ends with an emphasis on eternal life, on dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. In other words, in being in the presence of God forever and ever and ever. And that's really the essence of eternal life, it is eternal communion with the shepherd who loved us so much that he gave his very life, he gave himself, so that we might be saved from sin and death and hell, and we might enter into the glory and the joy of eternal life. In closing here I'd like to just end with a couple points not from the living tradition this time, I don't want to quote one of the Church Fathers, I want quote the Catechism of the Catholic Church. And one of the reasons I'm doing that is because in our day and time a lot of people just don't believe in hell anymore, and also a lot of people don't believe in heaven anymore. As secularism rises and as atheism and agnosticism spread, one of the first things to go is the belief in the supernatural, belief in eternal life; whether it's eternal union with God in heaven or eternal separation from God in hell. I just want to point out here that Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats should make very clear where he stands on the reality of heaven and the reality of hell. These are his last words in his public ministry, and they are a teaching about the reality of the final judgment and heaven and hell. And if you don't believe in those things, it is really going to affect every decision you make in your life, it is going to change the way you live your daily life. So it is important to note that in the official teaching of the Church that's given to us in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church reaffirms three things. First, number one, in paragraph 544 it emphasizes that Jesus identifies himself with the poor and that our love for the poor is an essential part of our spiritual life. So in paragraph 544, the Catechism says this:

Jesus identifies himself with the poor of every kind and makes active love toward them the condition for entering his kingdom.

That's a very strong statement. Jesus identifies with the poor and he makes our love for the poor a condition of entering into the kingdom of God. So there shouldn't be any debate about that. Our expression of love for the poor through works of charity, especially corporal works of mercy, is a condition for entering the kingdom. That is the first point. The second point. The Church is very clear, on the other hand, about the reality of hell. If you look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1033, not only does the Church affirm the reality of hell, but it bases its teaching about hell on the parable of the sheep and the goats, on Jesus' own words. So this is what the Catechism says on paragraph 1033:

We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him. But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves

And then it actually quotes the passage I was alluding to earlier, 1 John 3:14-15

"He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren. [Matt 25:31-46, the sheep and the goats] To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell."

So notice here two things. First, the Church is very clear that we can't be united with God unless we freely love him. In other words, God respects our freedom. If we don't love him and we don't want to be with him forever and ever, he will respect that. And that state, second, of self exclusion — which is what it really is, it is us choosing not to love God — from his eternal love is by definition hell. That's what we mean when we say hell. So it's important to note that because sometimes people can think of God as like thrusting us into hell against our will. That's just not the teaching of the Church. The Church is very clear that because heaven is nothing other than our loving God for all eternity, and him loving us, that eternal exchange of love, that hell by definition is also nothing other than our refusing to love God and therefore being separated from him for all eternity. So it really is important to see that. And all of that is based on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and goats.

But the parable of the sheep and the goats — someone pointed this out to me recently — does not end with hell. Jesus talks about hell but he always ends with the reality of heaven. So he also says "but the righteous" will enter "into eternal life." So the Church also has a teaching on the reality of heaven. This is what the Catechism says about heaven. Listen to this. Paragraphs 1023-1024, what is heaven? What is it like?

Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God for ever, for they "see him as he is," face to face... This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity - this communion of life and love with the Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed - is called "heaven." Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness.

And that's really what it's all about, happiness. Jesus' first words in Matthew's Gospel on the mount of Beatitudes, in his first sermon, were the Beatitudes, happy are the poor in spirit, they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. And his last words in the parable of the sheep of the goats are enter into the joy of your Father's kingdom. So those two words, happiness and joy, are like bookends to Jesus' teaching, because ultimately he came into this world to teach us how to be happy and to lead us to the state of supreme definitive happiness, which is heaven itself. So I don't know about you, but I would like to be happy forever. I would love to enter into that eternal joy were I will be in communion not just with God, but with the Virgin Mary, with all the saints, with all the angels and all the blessed in an eternal banquet, an eternal kingdom of joy and

peace and happiness. That's really what heaven is, and so the Church brings the liturgical year, Ordinary Time, to an end by setting our sights on our eternal destiny, by setting our sights on the fact that not only is the Lord Jesus Christ the King of the universe, but that at the end of time we have to make a decision about whether we are going to spend eternity with him or without him. The parable of the sheep and the goats exhorts us, it calls us to live lives of love now, to love our neighbor now, especially the poor, so that we might love our neighbor and God forever in his eternal kingdom of Heaven.