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Matthew 16:9 - 16:13, 16:27 - 16:28



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses the interpretation of Matthew 16:9-13 and 16:27-28, where Jesus spoke about seeing the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Gregg challenges the notion that Jesus was predicting his second coming within the lifetime of his original listeners, and suggests that the language used in these verses may refer to Christ's ascension or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He acknowledges that there are differing interpretations of these verses, but encourages listeners to grapple with the context and language used to arrive at their own conclusions.

Transcript

Today, let's turn to Matthew chapter 16, and there's just a couple of verses at the end there that we need to have a look at because, well, we didn't cover them last time completely, and they also have some features of interest that I think you may want to look into. I'm looking at Matthew 16 verses 27 and 28. Jesus said, Now, here we have a troublesome passage for many Christians and even for some non-Christians.

I remember reading some years ago the essay by Bertrand Russell, the agnostic, entitled Why I Am Not a Christian. And among the things that he said prevented him from being a Christian was the fact that Jesus did not seem perfect. He did not seem like a divine person.

He even made mistakes. And he gave this as an example of one of Jesus' mistakes because Jesus said, Now, that sounds as if Jesus is anticipating his second coming occurring within the lifetime of some of his original listeners. Now, of course, he made this statement some 2,000 years ago, and yet his second coming does not appear to have occurred even yet 2,000 years later, and certainly all those who were standing there when he spoke have since died.

Therefore, on the surface, it looks as if Jesus made a mistake when he said some of those people standing there would not die before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. So, this looks like a mistake that Jesus made, and if Jesus made a mistake, then he can't very well be perfect, and he can't very well be God, so it is argued. Now, let me

just say this.

If we think that by having said those things we have exhausted our options, we are shallow thinkers. And Bertrand Russell would hardly ever be accused of being a shallow thinker, although he might well have been a shallow thinker when it came to the Bible. Because some people who are very disciplined in their thinking on other subjects have just decided that they don't want to believe the Bible, and they will take the simplest explanation of something that confirms to them their suspicions against the Bible and just stop searching from that point on.

Of course, those of us who believe that there are strong reasons to attribute truthfulness to Christ and to Christianity are disposed the other way. We are disposed to say, well, Jesus was probably right, since Jesus is God, and therefore we look beyond the first blush impression that we get, and we say, well, is there any way that Jesus could have been right here? Now, in giving some of these examples of what I think Jesus could have meant, there will no doubt be some skeptical people who will say, well, Steve, you're just grasping at straws in order to preserve a belief system. And, frankly, I don't believe that is the case.

I believe that Jesus' words can be understood quite well in another way and quite legitimately when we compare this statement with other statements he made elsewhere, and that it does not turn out that he was wrong at all. Now, however, if it appears to a skeptic that what I am doing is grasping at straws, desperately trying to find a way to salvage Jesus out of an embarrassing situation, let me just say that I believe unbelievers do that with their own beliefs a great deal. I think that they will see a passage which can be taken two ways, and they will just assume that the way that fits their beliefs is the way that it should be taken, so that they can reject it or whatever.

Now, that's what Bertrand Russell did. Bertrand Russell assumes that Jesus was talking about his second coming, and that he was predicting that his second coming would occur within the lifetime of those standing there. But that is not the only possible, and in my opinion, it's not the most likely interpretation of what Jesus was saying, so we need to have a look at that.

Now, I do believe, although some would disagree, that Jesus is speaking about the second coming in verse 27. He says, For the Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will reward each according to his works. Now, I know some who would say that even that statement is not referring to the second coming, but it seems to me that it is.

And I'm going to proceed on that assumption, because there are several other places in the scripture that speak of the second coming of Christ, and they do speak of him coming with his angels, and they do speak of him coming in judgment and to reward each person according to their deeds. This is a common theme in the New Testament.

However, there's no reason to assume that he is speaking about his second coming in the next verse.

He says, Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Now, to assume that the Son of Man coming in his kingdom must be a reference to the second coming is an assumption that is not warranted. And I do not believe he is referring to his second coming here.

I believe he was referring to something that indeed did occur within the lifetime of those standing there. But some would argue, Well, Steve, you've admitted that verse 27 is about the second coming, and then the very next verse you say is not. That's correct.

I believe that it is not. I believe that the flow of Jesus thought is simply this. In the end of time, Jesus will come back and reward all men according to their works, come with his mighty angels, and so forth, as he says in verse 27.

However, his disciples will not live to see that, but they can be assured that this will eventually happen because they will live to see the precursor of that. They will live to see him come in his kingdom, which will be a guarantee of his ultimate second coming. But his coming in his kingdom is not the same thing as his second coming.

I believe the coming of Christ in his kingdom occurred in the lifetime of those people. But that was not the second coming of Christ. It was simply a guarantee of, or a precursor of, or a foreshadowing of his second coming.

And while his disciples would not live to see his ultimate coming in judgment at the end of the world, they could be sure of its actual veracity, and that it would eventually come because they would see something that was the first fruits of it. It's very much like what the Bible teaches about our assurance of the resurrection of the last day. That we may not live to see the last day.

I mean, we might die before then. Christians throughout history have lived and died and did not see the resurrection of the last day. But we have assurance of that resurrection because there was a precursor to it in the resurrection of Christ.

And because Christ is risen from the dead and was the first fruits of those who had slept, it is the assurance, or the basis of our assurance, that we will rise from the dead in the last day also. Now what I understand this to mean is that Jesus often, or the Bible often, speaks of things that will happen at the end of time. But since most of his followers throughout history do not live at the end of time, he has given them a short-term event that is in principle similar to show that this is what he's capable of doing.

It's like the flood of the Old Testament. In 2 Peter 3, the Bible indicates that the flood of Noah's time was a precursor of the second coming. It showed that God was willing, if he had to, to judge the whole world and he'll someday do it again.

So also, Jesus' coming in his kingdom did occur during the lifetime of his disciples, at least of some of them. He said, some of you standing here will not taste death until you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. That coming in his kingdom did occur, but that was not the second coming.

That was something else. And therefore, the question is, what is he referring to when he refers to the Son of Man coming in his kingdom? There are at least four possible theories. Each person will have to weigh the scriptural evidence to decide which he prefers.

But in Matthew chapter 17, the very next chapter, in fact the very next verse after this prediction, we read that after six days, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, his brother, and brought them on a high mountain by themselves. And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light, etc. Now this was what we call the transfiguration of Christ.

Three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all of them record Jesus making the prediction that some of them standing there would not taste death until his kingdom would come, or until he would come in his kingdom. And all three of the Gospels skip over all events of the next week and come next to the transfiguration. That is, they place the transfiguration narrative immediately after the prediction.

Now there were certainly things that happened in that six or so days between the prediction and the transfiguration, but the Gospel writers have not chosen to record any of those events of those six days. And some have felt that the reason for that is that the Gospel writers saw the transfiguration as the fulfillment of that prediction. That is to say, when Peter, James, and John went up on the mountain, and they saw Christ glorified there, that that was a fulfillment of his prediction that some of them in that crowd would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man come in his kingdom.

Now, I don't personally think that this is the right interpretation, though a great number of Christians do. The problem with it is that we don't have any place in the Scripture that indicates that what happened on the transfiguration was the coming of Christ in his kingdom. And because we don't, it makes it harder to see it that way.

But another thing that makes it hard for me to see it that way is that in Matthew 24, Jesus said, This generation will not pass away until all these things are fulfilled. Now that's a different context, but in that context he also talks about the Son of Man coming. And when he does talk about the Son of Man coming, he says, This generation will not pass away before these things are fulfilled.

Now that sounds very much in content, the same statement as, Some of you standing here will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. That is to say, this generation will not pass, some of you will not die, before you see the Son of Man coming. These statements sound as if they're talking about the same thing.

Sound like it to me. And yet, although the first statement here in Matthew 16 occurred just before the transfiguration, the similar statement, the similar prediction in Matthew 24 occurred after the transfiguration. And therefore, Matthew 24, which seems to be predicting the same thing as Matthew 16 is predicting, Matthew 24 makes a statement after the transfiguration and cannot be predicting it.

Therefore, the fulfillment of this must be found beyond the transfiguration and beyond, of course, the time of Matthew 24. Matthew 24 was uttered in the final week of Jesus' life, and so very near the end of the gospel narratives. But what other possibilities are there? Suppose we do not say that the transfiguration is the fulfillment.

What other options exist for us? Well, there are several. One is that Jesus is referring to what Daniel said in Daniel chapter 7 and verse 12 and 13, especially verse 13. In Daniel 7, 13, it says, etc.

Now, this statement in Daniel chapter 7 is the only place in the Old Testament where the Messiah is referred to as the Son of Man. And Daniel says, Well, Jesus says, And he received a kingdom, it says. Jesus says, So, this statement that Jesus makes sounds like it borrows its wording from Daniel chapter 7, verse 13.

Now, many Christians assume that Daniel 7, 13 is talking about the second coming of Christ, but it is not. Daniel says, Now, the Ancient of Days in Daniel is in heaven. Ancient of Days is God the Father.

And therefore, he sees Jesus coming to God the Father through the clouds. What was the fulfillment of this event? Well, I think it must certainly be the ascension of Christ, because as the disciples watched Jesus ascend from the Mount of Olives, he disappeared in the clouds from their view. But Daniel was viewing this from the other side.

Daniel was seeing it from the heavenly side. And he saw Jesus coming through the clouds in his ascension and coming into heaven and sitting at the right hand of God the Father and receiving a kingdom. Therefore, Daniel is predicting not the second coming of Christ, but he's referring to the ascension of Christ, which occurred, of course, 40 days after his resurrection.

Now, it is entirely possible that Jesus was referring to this event when he said, Some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming, as Daniel said, in his kingdom. That would be a reference to the ascension of Christ, because that's what Daniel is predicting when he uses those terms. Now, also, Jesus said, Some of you will not taste of death.

If he had been talking about the transfiguration, then that would be an overstatement, because the transfiguration happened only, what, six or seven days after the prediction. None of them died in that period of time. So for him to say, Some of you won't die in that

period of time would be a maximal overstatement, because none of them did die.

But if he was talking about his ascension, at least one of them did die before that, and that was Judas Iscariot. The other 11 were still living to see the ascension, but Judas hanged himself, apparently, before that. And therefore, one of them did die, but some of them did not taste death before they saw this.

Therefore, the ascension of Christ could very well be what Jesus was alluding to. There's another possibility, and that is that he was referring to the day of Pentecost, which occurred only 10 days after his ascension. Now, the reason for saying that is because, whereas Matthew has Jesus saying, Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, the other gospel writers actually word the statement a little bit different.

And it says in Mark chapter 9, verse 1, He said to them, Assuredly, I say to you, that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power. Okay? Till they see the kingdom of God present with power. Some would say that that power of the kingdom was manifested as present on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out.

That God's kingdom power was poured out on the church. And that the kingdom of God was seen to be present with power, when, as Jesus said to the disciples, You will receive power, after that the Holy Spirit has come upon you. And that happened on the day of Pentecost.

Certainly, that happened within the lifetime of most of the disciples. Again, only Judas died in the interim. And therefore, the day of Pentecost could be what Jesus is referring to.

To speak of the day of Pentecost as Jesus coming in his kingdom, or coming with power, or his kingdom present with power, to associate the Pentecost with the coming of Jesus is actually quite a legitimate wording, because Jesus used that very expression in John chapter 14, when he was talking about the coming of the Spirit. He said in John 14, verses 15 through 18, If you love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father, and he will give you another helper, that he may abide with you forever. Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him, but you know him, because he dwells with you and shall be in you.

I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you. Now, interesting, Jesus says, I'm going to send the Spirit, I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you. And he seems to be referring there to coming in the person of the Holy Spirit.

I will come to you as another comforter. Also, a few verses later in John 14, verse 21, Jesus said, He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me, and

he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. And Judas, not Iscariot, said to him, Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us and not to the world? Jesus answered and said to him, If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

He's referring again to the Holy Spirit coming into the believer. He says, My Father and I will come to that person and make our home with him, meaning in the person of the Holy Spirit. So, in speaking of him coming to the believer, in the person of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit, of course, came to the church on the day of Pentecost, it could be that when Jesus says you will see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, or you'll see his kingdom and present in power, he could be referring to Pentecost, which was well within the lifetime of many of those disciples.

There is a fourth option that I'm aware of, and that is that when he speaks of his coming in his kingdom, he's not referring to the transfiguration, he's not referring to his ascension, he's not referring to Pentecost, but he's referring to something that was almost a generation later. Forty years later, when Jerusalem was destroyed, Jesus and John the Baptist made many predictions about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and this did occur within the lifetime of some of the disciples, though several had died before then, and it happened within that generation. Now, one reason for favoring this is that the Bible speaks of God judging evil nations.

In figurative terms, it speaks of that as God coming to them. For example, in Isaiah chapter 19 and verse 1, it speaks of God judging Egypt through the Assyrian armies, and it says, the Lord rides on a swift cloud and will come into Egypt. Now, God didn't personally and visibly come to Egypt, but he came in the form of judgment.

He sent armies on his behalf who destroyed Egypt. Well, God sent armies on behalf of himself to judge Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was the Roman armies. And using the same language of Isaiah, to say that he came on a cloud, just like it says in Isaiah 19.1 that God did when he judged Egypt, it's possible for this to be a reference to God coming in the form of judgment against Jerusalem in 70 AD and judging those who had crucified Christ there.

There are many reasons to suggest this possibility. Our time here does not allow me to give very many of them, but I will say this. Remember, I pointed out that this statement about some of you standing here will not taste death before you see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, sounds very much like the similar statement in Matthew 24, 31 or 32, where Jesus said this generation will not pass before all these things are fulfilled.

Now, if you look at Matthew 24, all these things that were to happen in that generation are wars and rumors of wars and plagues and pestilences and false messiahs and false prophets and so forth. And yet, after that, there's the coming of the Son of Man that

would happen in that generation. It must be said, I think, that all those things did not happen before Pentecost, and they did not happen before the Ascension, but they did happen before 70 AD.

And therefore, the prediction in Matthew 24 would appear to be a reference to 70 AD and the destruction of the temple when God came in judgment upon Israel at that time. And if that is what the statement in Matthew 24 is referring to, then that makes a good argument that the similar statement in Matthew 16 and verse 28 may be predicting the same thing. So I have to leave you undecided.

Maybe you've made your decision up, but I must confess that I'm undecided somewhat on this. But there are several very good suggestions as to the meaning of Jesus' words that do not require that we see him predicting his second coming as occurring within the lifetime of his disciples. And therefore, if he didn't predict it, then we cannot hold it against him that he said this.

After all, what he said did come true. We may not be sure exactly which thing is the identification with the fulfillment, whether it is the transfiguration, whether that was the disciples, some of them, seeing him come in his kingdom, whether it was the ascension, which following the wording of Daniel 7.13, was the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days and receiving a kingdom. We don't know whether it might be a reference to Pentecost when the Spirit came in power and Jesus, therefore, through the Spirit, came to the church in power.

And after all, Jesus said, you will see the kingdom present with power, some of you standing here. And we don't know whether he's speaking about 70 AD. But all of these things are possibilities.

And all of them, of course, vindicate Jesus of not having made a mistake in this case. More next time.