

The Teaching of Matthew 16:27-28

Let's preface our thoughts today with these questions:

1. Are we Bible believers? Of course we are.
2. Do we believe the Bible is our Creator's communication to us? Of course we do.
3. Haven't we seen God go out of His way to communicate to man via human experiences? Sure we have; such is why He employed numerous earthly illustrations in His Word.
4. Can ya think of a time when God ever used any sort of communication that couldn't be understood by someone He wanted to understand Him? I don't know of a case.
5. When the Lord asked Cain, "Where is Abel, your brother?," did Cain understand what his Creator was asking him? Certainly, for he answered saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" *Question by God; answered by a man.*
6. When the Lord commanded Noah to "go into the ark," did Noah understand what He said? Sure he did, for it says he "went into the ark." *Command by God; submitted to by a man.*
7. When the Lord pledged to Abraham that He'd multiply his descendants exceedingly, did Abe understand and act like he understood it? Indeed he did, for the Bible says that God counted him as righteous for believing what He had promised him. *Promise by God; believed by a man.* We could go on forever with such questions, but let's ask and answer one more specifically related to this study:
8. When the Lord told Moses to shut Miriam out of the camp for seven days when she had been struck with leprosy for some insolence toward her husband, how long did Moses shut her out of the camp? That's right—seven days (Num. 12:14-15). So...

When God said "seven days," did He employ language Moses could understand? He must have, for God was satisfied with their receiving her back in among them after seven days, and they were then allowed to continue on in their journey. Now...

Would God have been pleased with Moses had he brought Miriam back into the camp in four days or five days or even six days? Certainly Not! As seven dippings was seven dippings for Naaman, so seven days was seven days for Miriam; it was understood, made sense, and thus accepted, obeyed, and recorded for us to learn from today.

If Deity has been concerned enough to be sure we understand what Deity wants us to understand relative to the specific timing of a particular number of days, surely there's no good reason for us to presume that Deity would be less concerned with our understanding what Deity wants us to understand relative to more generic timing. Allow me to wax illustrative in regard to the passage under consideration today:

"Folks, I have some news to share with ya: I'm going to Europe to work for quite a long time. I don't know exactly how long; I just know that at least some of you in my audience today will still be alive when I return." So with that said...

Do ya think I'll be returning within six months? No. Why not? Because it's unreasonable to think most folks in this audience will breathe their last breaths in the next six months.

Do ya think I'll be returning within six days? No. Why not? Obviously if it's unreasonable to think most folks in this audience will breathe their last breaths in the next six months, *surely* it's unreasonable to think they'll breathe their last breaths in the next six days! So...

Within about how much time do ya think I'll be back? Well, I've read that the mortality rate of folks who died in the U.S. of natural causes in 2011 was around 79. So, taking that number and splitting it in half, we could say that an average audience age might be around 40, with about 40 years to go. This means that one could expect me to return from my extended trip to Europe within 40 years. Right? Right. OK, well...

When Jesus was 33 years old, He was speaking to an audience and saying much the same thing I just said. Listen to Jesus: "There are some of you standing here who will not taste of death till they see Me coming in My kingdom" (Mat. 16:28). Now...

Ignoring any presuppositions on what we've been taught about this statement of Jesus, do ya think that He thought that they, based on what He said, would expect to see His coming within six months of that day? Surely not! Why not? Because it's unreasonable to think most folks in His audience that day would breathe their last breaths in the next six months. So...

Do ya think that He thought that they, based on what He said, would expect to see His coming within six days of that day? Surely not! Why? That's right: because it's unreasonable to think most in His audience that day would breathe their last in the next six days. Now...

Why did I choose six months and six days? Because, due to preconceptions, most Christians have been taught that this short time-limiting statement by Jesus concerning His coming in His kingdom *simply must* have concerned either the event of His transfiguration six days later or to the inauguration of the church six months later. It seems to have never occurred to them that there might actually be third option, viz. altering their view of the nature of Jesus' return in/with His kingdom. Anyway...

The main point is this: It wouldn't even make good nonsense for Jesus to say what He said about most of them being dead by the time of His coming if He were talking about six days or even six months later. (You may ask why I said that "most" would've died by the time of His return. Well, perhaps it's an assumption on my part, but I believe folks in general see the progression of relative terms as none, one, some, most, and all, meaning that "some" represents a smaller number than "most." So since Jesus said that "some" of the "all" in that group would still be living when He returned, I presume He meant that "most" of them would be deceased, thus indicating a somewhat lengthy time, though a time not longer than approximately 40 years [i.e. a generation, Heb. 3].) Well...

Since we're on the subject of what Jesus said in Matthew 16:28 having to do with either the transfiguration or church-inauguration, let's consider a few more interesting tid-bits relative to those ideas. To do this, we should read Jesus' entire statement, meaning that we need to head back a little in man's Bible-division of sentences to verse 27. Keep in mind...

There was no punctuation in first-century Greek, meaning that the period at the end of verse 27 could just as well be a semi-colon, making verses 27-28 one statement. Here's why: Firstly, at the outset of verse 28 Jesus chose the Greek term *amen* which (acc. to *HELPS Word Studies*) is an "emphasis marker" that expands or expounds upon that which precedes it and is therefore "essential in interpreting the overall passage"; and therefore, secondly, *amen* may very accurately be translated as "in fact." So with all this in mind...

Here's Jesus now speaking in the first person: "I will come in the glory of My Father with His angels, and I will reward each according to his works; in fact I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste of death until they see My coming in My kingdom." So...

Concerning the transfiguration..., {1} Did Jesus come? Nope. He was already there; He was transfigured, not translated. {2} Were there any angels present? Not that we have recorded. {3} Did Jesus judge and thus reward everyone? Not that we can read. {4} Is there any indication that the kingdom came at that point? Nope; in fact, the kingdom was still spoken of as being a future reality in Luke 17:20, 19:1ff, & 21:31. And {5} only three were there to see Him, not all of those (who were still alive) from the crowd from six days earlier.

Concerning the church-inauguration..., {1} Did Jesus come in the event of Acts Two? Nope; rather, after He spoke to His disciples moments earlier of needing to leave them, in John 16 He said, "It's to your advantage that I go; for if I don't go, the Helper [the Spirit of 14:16 & 15:26] won't come" (cf. Acts 2:33). {2} Were there any angels present in that event? Not that we have recorded. {3} Did Jesus judge and thus reward everyone? Not that we can read. {4} Was Jesus "seen" during that event? If so, there sure isn't any indication of it in

Acts Two. Besides, Jesus sent the Spirit at that time specifically because He wouldn't be coming. Right? And {5} did the kingdom arrive during that event? Some would say, as I used to, "Yes," but I no longer believe that, and here's why:

The *church* came, but the kingdom did not, for the church and the kingdom are not the same thing; even in Acts One, when Jesus was asked about the timing of the kingdom's arrival, He replied that such wasn't for them to worry about, but He did go on to tell them the timing of the coming of the church via the Spirit ten days later. Besides, after this...

The kingdom was said to still be future *many* times (Acts 14:22, 1 Cor. 6:8ff, Gal. 5:21, Eph. 5:5, Col. 4:11, 1 The. 2:12, 2 The. 1:5, 2 Tim. 4:1, 18, Heb. 12:28, & 2 Pet. 1:11).

So if Jesus wasn't talking about His coming in His kingdom at the time of His transfiguration or church-inauguration, then to what event was He referring? I submit that the only other occasion that even comes close is the demise of Judaism at the events of Jerusalem's AD 70 annihilation.

I've already referred to two statements by Jesus in this regard: When speaking about Jerusalem's destruction in Luke 17, Jesus brought up the coming of the kingdom in verse 20. Then later in Luke's account of Jesus' *Olivet Discourse* about Jerusalem's destruction, Jesus came right out and said, "When you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is at hand; in fact I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away until all these things are fulfilled" (21:31; cf. v. 22).

So someone says, "OK, let's say I agree that the kingdom came in AD 70, for that does seem to make sense. What about the visible coming of Jesus to judge with angels and such?" Well, as indicated in the introduction, here's the thing: the simple/clear things Deity expresses should be what aid us in interpreting the less simple/clear things Deity expresses; in specific regard to this topic, the time-statements supplied by Jesus and His inspired speakers/writers must determine what was meant by the nature of Jesus' coming. Consider Luke 17:20ff.

In this passage Jesus placed His coming on par in nature with the kingdom's coming: in verses 20-21 He said, "The kingdom isn't coming with observation so that people can say, 'See here' or 'See there.'" Then, when going right on to speak about His coming in verses 22-23 He likewise said, "You won't see it. They will say, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' but don't follow them." I.e., His return wouldn't be visible—it would be just as unobservable as the kingdom would be; after all, since He said He'd come "in" His (unobservable) kingdom (Mat. 16:28), then logically He'd be just as unobservable. So...

Since the coming of Him and His kingdom were unobservable, why would we expect the angels and His rewards to be observable? Remember the case in 2 Kings 6 in which the King of Assyria sent armies that frightened Elisha's servant? Remember what Elisha did for him to show him that God had more hosts than the Assyrian king had sent? Verse 17 tells us that Elisha said, "'Lord ... open his eyes that he may see.'" Then the Lord opened the eyes of the youth, and he saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around." I.e., God was *behind the scenes* orchestrating all things regarding His people and His ultimate plan for man's redemption via Israel; this is what happened as well when the armies of Titus flooded Jerusalem (cf. Rev. 17:17).

According to Daniel 7:13ff, judgment was to be made between God's Old Covenant people who refused His Son as Messiah (the goats) and His New Covenant people (the sheep) who accepted His Son as Messiah, and it was all to be fulfilled in the time of the fourth empire (Rome) and the complete shattering of the OC people in Jerusalem's final destruction.

This corresponds very well to what Jesus said in Matthew's account of the *Olivet Discourse*. In 24:15 He even referred specifically to Daniel relative to Jerusalem's demise, saying that all those things (things including His coming in clouds, His coming with a trumpet, and His coming with angels to gather His people together) would occur before the end of

that generation (v. 34). Did those things happen? Or did they not? I believe they did; I believe the events that were visible were clear signs of the events that were not visible, fulfilling all prophecies (Luke 21:22), even those of Jesus Himself. If not, why not? OK...

Let's get back to Matthew 16:27-28 specifically for a moment and notice something else about the first and second parts of this statement by Jesus which correlate very well.

There are those who are forced to introduce 2,000 years of time between the first part of what Jesus said in our humanly-individualized verse 27 and the second part of what Jesus said in our humanly-individualized verse 28. Especially with regard to how Jesus said what He said, please tell me where in the world one gets the (hermeneutical) authority to do that?

In the verse 27 part Jesus (according to Matthew) chose the Greek word *mello* when He said that He'd come in His Father's glory. This word carries imminence and means "about to" (as is translated in every case in McReynold's interlinear and is defined as such by Thayer and Vine in their Greek dictionaries). This means Jesus let that/His generation know that He was—at that time—*about to* bring to fruition the prophecies concerning the promised Messiah's work of establishing the Kingdom of God. When? Imminently—in their "generation" (a term, according to Mark's account, that Jesus chose for this conversation).

The word *mello* then corresponds perfectly with what Jesus said in the second part of his statement (viz. v. 28) concerning the fulfilling of all of this before everyone in His audience that day had passed away. How much more hand-in-glove can one get?

Not only do we humans not have the right to insert 2,000 years between verses 27 & 28, we also don't have the right to invert these verses, especially if they were indeed written as one sentence stated with one breath by our Lord; i.e., there are those who, due to their beliefs, are forced to switch the order of what Jesus said, thereby transposing the chronology of what He said, making Him speak of (in their view) the end of the material universe in verse 27, after which He spoke of the inauguration of the church in verse 28. Are there any other statements of Jesus we treat like this? I certainly hope not. So...

Our deliberation upon the declaration of Jesus in Matthew 16:27-28 has yielded two primary conclusions: {1} the events of the transfiguration and church-inauguration were too close in time-proximity to correspond to the parameters Jesus provided; and {2} the position of a yet future return of Jesus in judgment and His kingdom is too far in time-proximity to correspond to those same parameters. So...

Since Jesus, in the first person, said to an audience of His contemporaries 2,000 years ago that "There are some of you standing here who will not taste of death until they see Me coming in My kingdom," we're left with this choice: either we accept His unambiguous declaration concerning the timing of His return, necessitating that we reconsider our traditional position concerning the nature and purpose of His return, or we reject His face-value time statement and continue forcing it to harmonize with our traditional position of the nature and purpose of His return. What will the Berean-minded one do (cf. Acts 17:11)?

[Tony E. Denton, May 2014]