

THE OUTER DARKNESS

WHERE IS IT? WHO WILL BE CAST THEREIN?

By Arlen L. Chirwood

The expression “outer darkness” only appears three times in Scripture, and all three are found in Matthew’s gospel (8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Luke, in his gospel, alludes to outer darkness in a parallel reference to Matt. 8:11, 12 (Luke 13:28, 29) but does not use the words. He simply reduces the expression to “without” (ASV).

Both Matthew and Luke use the Greek word *ekballo*, which means to “cast out.” Following the use of this word, the place into which individuals in these passages are cast is given in both gospels. In Matthew’s gospel the place is “into outer darkness [*lit.*, from the Greek text, ‘into the darkness, the outer,’ or as we would normally say in an English translation, ‘into the outer darkness,’ or ‘into the darkness outside’ (in the Greek text there are definite articles before both the noun and adjective, pointing to a particular place of darkness outside a particular place of light)].” In Luke’s gospel the place is described as “without,” or “on the outside.”

The expressed thoughts by both Matthew and Luke locate this place immediately outside and contiguous to the region from which those in view are “cast out.” Both passages refer to the same place — a place of darkness on the outside.

The place from which individuals are “cast out” is one of light. This can possibly be illustrated best in Matthew chapter twenty-two. In this chapter, “outer darkness” is used to describe conditions in an area immediately outside the festivities attendant a royal wedding. Such festivities in the East would normally be held at night inside a lighted banquet hall. On the outside there would be a darkened courtyard; and the proximity of this darkened courtyard to the lighted banquet hall would correspond perfectly to the expression, “the outer darkness,” or “the darkness on the outside.” A person cast therein would be cast out of the light into the darkness. And it is the same in relation to the kingdom itself and positions of rulership

therein as set forth in Matt. 8:11, 12; 25:14-30.

“Outer darkness” is simply one realm immediately outside of another realm, called “outer darkness” by way of contrast to the “inner light.” Those cast out *are removed from a sphere associated with light and placed outside in a sphere associated with darkness.*

Matthew 8:11, 12

In the first appearance of “outer darkness” in Matthew’s gospel (8:12), the text and context both have to do with a message concerning *the kingdom*. Jesus had just finished a lengthy discourse to His disciples, commonly called the “Sermon on the Mount” (chs. 5-7), which is a connected discourse dealing with *entrance into or exclusion from the kingdom of the heavens*. Then in chapter eight the subject matter continues with the message concerning *the kingdom*, as the subject matter immediately prior to the Sermon on the Mount. The message at this point actually picks up where chapter four left off — a message accompanied by physical healings.

These physical healings were *signs* intimately connected with Christ’s proclamation of the message of the kingdom to Israel. The signs, reflecting on the condition of the nation, depicted in Isaiah chapter one, pointed to available *spiritual healing* for the entire nation. As individuals were being healed (in the signs), so could the entire nation be healed, conditioned on *national repentance*.

It is within a contextual setting of this nature that “outer darkness” first appears in Matthew’s gospel. Actually, the subject arose after a Roman centurion expressed faith that Christ could heal his servant (who was sick at home) by just speaking the word. Christ used the faith exhibited by this Gentile to illustrate a contrasting lack of faith exhibited by those in Israel. Christ said that He had “not found so great faith, no, not in Israel” (v. 10). He then spoke of a day when *many* would come “from the east and the west” and “sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of the heavens.”

That is, a separate and distinct group of individuals who were not Jewish — “from the east and the west [outside Israel — *which, at that time, could only have been viewed as Gentiles*],” would exhibit faith on the same order as this centurion and enter into the heavenly sphere of the kingdom. But those to whom this sphere of the kingdom

naturally belonged, because of their lack of faith, would be excluded. The “sons of the kingdom [those in Israel]” would be “cast out” (vv. 11, 12).

The entire scene anticipated Matt. 21:43 where the announcement was made concerning *the heavenly* portion of the kingdom being taken from Israel (not *the earthly*, which can never be taken from Israel), with a view to a *separate and distinct group ultimately occupying that which did not naturally belong to them*. This group would be comprised of those who, at that time, were *aliens, without hope, and without God*. But “in Christ Jesus” these conditions would change. They would be “made nigh by the blood of Christ.” Through being “in Christ” they would become “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise [the heavenly portion of the promise given to Abraham]” (Gal. 3:17, 18, 29; Eph. 2:12, 13; cf. Gen. 22:17).

Matthew 22:1-14

In the second appearance of “outer darkness” in Matthew’s gospel (22:13), a marriage festival is depicted. The contextual usage in this passage is in association with *the kingdom of the heavens and the activities attendant a royal wedding*. Contextually, the “King” and His “Son” (v. 2) can only be identified as *God the Father* and *God the Son*. The “servants” and “other servants” (vv. 3, 4) sent “to call them that were bidden [Israel]” refer to the ministries of the *Old Testament prophets* (cf. Matt. 21:33-36).

This offer, however, was spurned, and the messengers were ill-treated. Then, last of all, God sent His Son (heralded by *John the Baptizer* and later accompanied by *the Twelve*), saying, “They will reverence my Son.”

Jesus, near the conclusion of His earthly ministry, rode into Jerusalem astride an ass, presenting Himself as Israel’s King in fulfillment of the prophecy in Zech. 9:9 (Matt. 21:1-11). But *He too was rejected*, culminating in His crucifixion and death (cf. Matt. 21:37-39; 22:1-6; 23:1ff).

The rejection of God’s Son was the final blow. The kingdom was *then* taken from Israel, with a view to the kingdom being extended to a separate and distinct nation (cf. Matt. 21:41b-46; 22:8-10). Individuals comprising this new nation would be synonymous with those from “the east and the west” in Matt. 8:11, which Scripture subsequently reveals to be *the one new man* “in Christ,” called into existence to be the recipient of that which Israel

rejected (cf. Matt. 21:43; Eph. 2:11-15; I Peter 2:9, 10).

And this unbelief on the part of Israel, followed by others being brought in to be the recipients of that which naturally belonged to Israel, leads up to the mention of “outer darkness” in both passages.

At this point though there is a difference in the two passages. Outer darkness in Matt. 8:12 is reserved for “the sons of the kingdom [a reference to Israel in this text],” but outer darkness in Matt. 22:13 is reserved for an individual, separate from Israel, appearing at the marriage festivities attendant the wedding of God’s Son.

The man cast into outer darkness in Matt. 22:13 appeared without the proper attire required for entrance into the royal festival in view. He appeared *without a wedding garment*. Israel had previously been mentioned in verses three through seven, but the man appearing without a wedding garment is identified with *those called after the announcement concerning the kingdom being taken from Israel had been made* (cf. vv. 8-10, 14). This man would, thus, be among those from “the east and the west” in Matt. 8:11, taken from among those comprising *the one new man* “in Christ,” referred to as among those from “the highways” in Matt. 22:9, 10.

To reconcile what is taught in these two passages, bear in mind that at the time of Matt. 8:11, 12 the kingdom of the heavens had not yet been taken from Israel; but Matt. 22:1-14 was given at a time *following* the announcement of the removal of the heavenly portion of the kingdom from Israel, with the anticipation of this offer being made to another group.

In both passages it is *the recipients of the offer of the kingdom of the heavens* who find themselves associated with the place called “outer darkness.”

In Matthew chapter eight the offer of the kingdom of the heavens was open to Israel alone, even though the allusion was made to others being brought into this kingdom; and in Matthew chapter twenty-two the offer of this portion of the kingdom had been removed from Israel and was open only to the new nation which was about to be brought forth. Thus, “outer darkness” is used the same way in both passages. It is used in association with those *to whom the offer of the kingdom of the heavens was then open*.

Matthew 25:14-30

The third appearance of “outer darkness” in Matthew’s gospel (25:30) is in a tripartite, connected discourse

which deals with *the Jews, the Christians, and the Gentiles* — the Olivet Discourse. The inception of Christianity *awaited* a future date at this time; but the discourse, given *following* Christ’s statement that He would build His Church and *following* the announcement of the removal of the kingdom of the heavens from Israel, anticipated *the one new man* “in Christ” being brought into existence (Matt. 16:18, 19; 21:33-43; cf. Eph. 2:12-15).

The first part of the discourse (24:4-39) deals exclusively with events pertaining to Israel in the coming Tribulation and with the return of the nation’s Messiah at the conclusion of the Tribulation. Israel had rejected the offer of the kingdom of the heavens, and now the nation must pass through the Great Tribulation and await her Messiah “in the way of thy judgments” (Isa. 26:8).

The second part of the discourse (24:40-25:30) deals with the new recipients of the offer of the kingdom of the heavens. The emphasis throughout this section is upon present faithfulness in view of a future time of reckoning, anticipating the kingdom.

The third part of the discourse (25:31-46) deals with the judgment of living, saved Gentiles following Christ’s return at the conclusion of the Tribulation.

In this fashion, the three sections of the Olivet Discourse reveal God’s dealings with the three segments of mankind — *Jew, Christian, and Gentile* — during the latter part and at the conclusion of the present age.

In *the Jewish section* of this discourse, God’s dealings with Israel are restricted to the time during and immediately following the coming Tribulation. The reason for this is very simple: Israel has been set aside during the present time while God removes from the Gentiles “a people for his name.” The time when God will deal with Israel once again awaits the completion of His purpose for the present dispensation. This is the reason that the Jewish section of the Olivet Discourse begins with Israel in the Tribulation. This section begins at the point where God resumes His dealings with Israel once again.

In *the Christian section* of this discourse, unlike the Jewish section, God *does* deal with a people during the present time — a time preceding the Tribulation. And those with whom God is presently dealing are the recipients of the offer of the kingdom of the heavens *following* Israel’s rejection of this offer.

In *the Gentile section* of this discourse, only the

Gentiles are in view. God, at that time in the future when these events occur, will have completed His dealings with the Church, and possibly with Israel as well. At this time God’s Son will turn to and judge saved Gentiles coming out of the Tribulation immediately prior to His 1,000-year reign over the earth.

The expression, “outer darkness,” is found in the parable of the talents in the Christian section of the Olivet Discourse. This parable immediately follows the parable of the ten virgins and is introduced by the Greek words *Hesper gar* — meaning, “For just as” — which tell the reader that *the parable about to follow is just like the parable which has preceded*. Verse fourteen, introducing this parable, should literally read, “For it [the parable of the ten virgins] is just as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.”

The parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents concern the same basic issues. And so it is with the parable of the Householder and His servant preceding the parable of the ten virgins. Each succeeding parable provides additional information to help explain the former.

In the parable of the Householder and His servant, unfaithfulness resulted in *an apportion with the hypocrites*; in the parable of the ten virgins, the unfaithful servants (foolish virgins) *were excluded from the marriage festivities*; and in the parable of the talents, the unfaithful servant *was cast into the darkness outside*.

Understanding the interrelationship between these parables and comparing them with the parable of the marriage festival in chapter twenty-two, it becomes clear that “outer darkness” is associated with all three. This is the place where the unfaithful servants found themselves in all of the parables, even though the expression is used only in the parable of the talents. One parable describes *the place*, and all three describe *conditions in this place*.

Accordingly, “outer darkness” describes the place which *the unfaithful* among those to whom the offer of the kingdom of the heavens is presently being extended — *i.e.*, Christians — will occupy during both the marriage festivities and the subsequent 1,000-year reign of Christ.

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