

The Apostles' Creed

Part 10

He Shall Come to Judge

Acts 17:29-31

With Study Questions

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This morning we will discuss the portion in the Apostles' Creed which states that from His ascended seat, Jesus, **"shall come to judge the quick and the dead."**

Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising. ³⁰ Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, ³¹ because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:29-31).

Introduction

I recently received a correspondence from a young lady who simply couldn't accept, as she put it, the "incredibly cruel" nature of God's judgments recorded in the Old Testament (Joshua 10:32, 35, 37, 39; 6:21; Deuteronomy 7:2, 16, 20, etc.). "Cruel," this lady wrote, "seems almost not strong enough a term. How can any of this (the killing of entire groups of people) be okay in any context?"

In contrast we read prophetic accounts in the Old Testament of men and women wondering why God is taking so long to judge. **"How long"** the Psalmist writes, **"will the enemy blaspheme your name"** (Psalms 74:10)? He laments, **"How long will the wicked triumph"** (Psalm 94:3)? Habakkuk in a similar manner cries to the Lord for judgment:

O Lord, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. ³ Why do You show me iniquity, And cause *me* to see trouble? For plundering and violence *are* before me; There is strife, and contention arises ⁴ Therefore the law is powerless, And

justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

Even the souls of those under the altar who had been slain for the world of God cry out, **“How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 6:10).**

So we have a young lady quite confused (understandably so) at the severity of the judgments of God in the Old Testament against those who actually lived during that period wondering why God was taking so long.

I sought to explain to this young lady just how evil the surrounding nations of Israel had become (not to mention the entire world during the time of Noah—where **“every intent of the thoughts of his (man’s) heart was only evil continually” Genesis 6:5).**

To help her gain some perspective she had to understand that prior to the exodus from Egypt the iniquity of the Amorites (one of the judged nations) had reached its fullness (Genesis 15:16). In an effort to explain, I wrote:

These people were brutal...sacrificing their own babies to the grill of the false god Molech. Imagine, if you will a nation of super-Nazis or thousands of Charles Manson’s terrorizing each other and the world which surrounded them. I have no doubt that if you were given access to these people and observed their abject evil you would whole-heartedly agree with the judgment they faced.

Paul in Athens

As the Apostle Paul walked about in Athens he saw a city given over to idols. Perhaps similar to the way many Americans feel about the current trends in this country, it is recorded that Paul’s spirit **“was provoked within him” (Acts 17:16).** He, therefore, decided to **“reason”** in the synagogue (Acts 17:17). We should never underestimate the power of a reasonable argument!

After making the clever association that their **“Unknown God”**, the one they were worshiping **“without knowing” (Acts 17:23)** is in fact the true God, Paul moves quite rapidly (after a supreme answer to all of Greece’s philosophical queries which we haven’t time to examine here), moves to a proclamation of judgment.

He begins with a subtle rebuke of their idols. The Divine Nature should not be thought of like Gold or silver or stone, **“something shaped by art and man’s devising” (Acts 17:29)**. This is followed by a reference to **“times of ignorance God overlooked” (Acts 17:30)**; a phrase which, I intend to show, plays into our current culture quite fittingly. This is followed, not by an invitation to ask Jesus into their hearts, but a command that **“all men everywhere repent” (Acts 17:30)**.

A Command to Repent

Repentance *metanoein* is a changing of the mind. And it is a changing of the mind about everything – who God is, who we are, what sin is, where my hope lies, what is right, what is wrong, etc. And this changing of the mind is not inert or static. A genuine changing of the mind brings with it a changing of the will – which is why Paul writes to Timothy that repentance is something granted by God (1 Timothy 2:25). An imputed righteousness always includes an imparted righteousness. Jesus illustrates by pointing out the hypocrisy of a mere outward display of religiosity:

But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’²⁹ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went.³⁰ Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.³¹ Which of the two did the will of *his* father?” They said to Him, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you (Matthew 21:28-31).

In our study of the Apostles’ Creed we surveyed the humiliation of Jesus in His birth, suffering, crucifixion and death. But the Creed rapidly moved to the exaltation of Christ in His resurrection and ascension to the

right hand of the Father. It is from this exalted seat that He will come to judge the quick (not meaning fast, but alive, like quicksand) and the dead. It is because Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father, **“far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come”** (Ephesians 1:20, 21) that Paul can confidently express that repentance is a command.

And because we live in a culture which has come to regard Jesus as yet another Greek god, capriciously ruling from a semi-celestial dwelling place, this authoritative command to repent carries a certain discomfort with Christian and non-Christian alike. This is due to a marginalized perception of Jesus. We would be much more comfortable with a command that people be honest, just, loving. But we must recognize that Jesus is the embodiment of all verities.

To reject Christ is to reject honesty, justice and love. To reject Jesus is to reject life itself. It is no mere colloquialism when God says, **“All those who hate me love death”** (Proverbs 8:36). The verities (or human virtue) are not independent from God but are examples and extensions of His very nature. This is why when God of Scripture is extracted from a culture (whether political, familial or ecclesiastical) all ethics are flung into the atmosphere like so much space garbage.

Ordained to Judge

Paul goes on to explain that God **“has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained”** (Acts 17:31). My young friend asked how could God judge while the prophets asked why He was not judging. Paul teaches (along with many other writers of Scripture) that there will be a day of reckoning when all must give an account – **“we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 5:10). Appropriate are the words of Augustine: **“He who stood under a judge, will sit as Judge...He who was Himself falsely pronounced guilty, will condemn the truly guilty.”**

Jesus, as the ascended and reigning King, will continue to reign until He has put all of His enemies under His feet – the last enemy being death (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26). When Jesus comes again, it will not be to set up a kingdom, for His kingdom has already been established and His reign is a

current phenomenon (Matthew 12:28); when Jesus comes again, it will be to judge. And the judgment of Christ is spoken of in the most dynamic terms:

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven,²⁶ whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven (Hebrews 12:25, 26).

That there will be a judgment is an event commonly mocked by our ever increasing apostate culture. But the Scriptures are not ambiguous about a judgment. Jesus speaks of the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22). Hell *gehenna* was a place (originally the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem) where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned – also the sacrifices of Molech were offered there (2 Kings 16:3). It is the place where the "worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:44).

The Psalmist pleads with God due to his hopeless condition.

Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous (Psalm 143:2).

We read also in Job:

But how can a man be righteous before God? ³ If one wished to contend with Him, He could not answer Him one time out of a thousand (Job 9:2, 3).

When the Psalmist writes, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3) the implied answer to the question is 'no one'.

A God Who Overlooks?

When Paul wrote that these people were living in "times of ignorance" that God "overlooked" (Acts 17:30), I don't take that to mean

that God was Himself ignoring sin, for God is a just God who will not acquit the wicked (Nahum 1:3). But Paul was addressing people, similar to those we might address today, who mistake God's patience for God's absence. And in the midst of God's patience, like these Athenians, engage in self-deification (which is what happens when you make your own gods).

The Psalmist records the very same disposition when he writes of God's disposition toward the wicked

These *things* you have done, and I kept silent; You thought that I was altogether like you; *But* I will rebuke you, And set *them* in order before your eyes (Psalm 50:21).

The patience and apparent silence of God becomes a field where men are emboldened to reduce God to the image of themselves "**You thought I was altogether like you**" "**no holier, no purer, no more averse to evil.**"¹

But they are storing up wrath (Job 36:13) and a rebuke will come and things will be set in order. It may be one of the greatest deceits of Satan that there will not be a day in which things are set in order – when the justice of God is made manifest. Calvin addresses the intensity of this:

The greatest dishonor which any can cast upon his name is that of impeaching his justice. This hypocrites may not venture to do in an open manner, but in their secret and corrupt imagination they figure God to be different from what he is, that they may take occasion from his conceived forbearance to indulge a false peace of mind, and escape the disquietude which they could not fail to feel were they seriously persuaded that God was the avenger of sin.²

Jesus will come to judge the quick and the dead:

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those

¹The Pulpit Commentary: Psalms Vol. I. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (387). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

²Calvin, J. (1998). Calvin's Commentaries: Psalms (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ps 50:21). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation
(John 5:28, 29).

Who Can Stand?

And who can stand in the judgment of Christ? When the Psalmist writes, **“If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”** (Psalm 130:3) the implied answer to the question is ‘no one’. Which is why he follows up with **“But *there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared*”** (Psalm 130:3, 4).

The kingdom of God is occupied by forgiven sinners. Jesus taught that **“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”** (John 3:18).

It is the height of human folly to ignore the inevitability of our mortality and subsequent judgment. The author of Hebrews conveys what we all know, that **“it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Hebrews 9:27). But praise God for verse 28 **“so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation”** (Hebrew 9:28).

As we enter into our preparation for the Lord’s Supper. Let us deeply consider the words of Christ – man’s only hope in the Day of Judgment:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. ⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world (John 6:47-51)

Questions for Study

1. Do God's judgments in the Old Testament seem overly severe to you? Explain your answer (pages 2, 3).
2. What was the Apostle Paul's attitude as we walked around Athens? How did he deal with it (pages 3, 4)?
3. Do you see a distinction between the way Paul evangelized and the way evangelism is done today (pages 4-6)?
4. What is repentance (pages 4, 5)?
5. What right does Jesus have to command people to repent? How is this reasonable (pages 5, 6)?
6. Who will judge the world? What will that be like (pages 5, 6)?
7. Does God ignore sin? Explain (pages 6, 7).
8. How can anyone stand in the judgment of Christ (page 8)?