

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

From Thence He Shall Come To Judge

April 18th, 2021

Acts 1:6-11 and various texts

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! We are going to be surveying a number of passages this morning, but I want to invite you to turn with me now in your Bibles to Acts 1. Acts 1:6-11 will function as our “starting point” today as we consider the line:

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

This is a line in the creed that is widely understood but, in my estimation, narrowly believed. If it *is* believed, then it seems to be believed with limited effect. To that end, we’re going to begin this morning with a quick summary of the doctrine that this line represents, but I want to spend the bulk of our time wrestling through why and how this doctrine ought to change us. So, let’s begin with the simple question:

What Does This Mean?

Let’s turn our attention to Acts 1:6-11 as we answer this question. In this text, the resurrected Jesus is about to ascend to the right hand of the Father, but before he leaves his disciples, he gathers them together and gives them one last instruction. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:6-11 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Here in this text, we see that the ascension and the return of Christ are meant to be understood together – which is why they are presented together in the Apostle’s Creed. The disciples marvelled at the ascension. They stood in awe and stared up into the clouds wondering when their Lord and King would return. I imagine that they might have stood there for days were it not for the intervention of the angels.

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, **will come in the same way as you saw him go** into heaven. (Acts 1:11 ESV)

This is what we mean when we say:

From thence he shall come

Jesus is currently in Heaven at the right hand of the Father and from THENCE he is going to return. We don’t know when he will return, and Jesus told us that anyone who claims to know the date of his arrival is a liar. He said in Matthew 24:36:

But concerning that day and hour **no one knows**, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. (Matthew 24:36 ESV)

No one knows the day and hour. But Jesus is going to come. From the right hand of the Father – from his position of absolute authority – the King of all kings and the Judge of all things will descend from his heavenly throne and the world will stop dead in its tracks. The Queen will bow

down. The governor will tremble in fear. The atheist will ask the mountains to fall on him because, the return of the King will be awe inspiring. In Matthew 24 Jesus describes that day:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31 ESV)

The return of the King is going to be a cataclysmic, world transforming event. The kingdom of the enemy will finally, once and for all be cast down. The devil and his angels will be thrown into the lake of fire. The time for repentance will be over. All people of all time will bow before the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus first came to seek and save the lost, but he will return:

To judge the quick and the dead

He will judge with absolute justice. The Apostle John describes this sobering scene of the final judgement in Revelation 20:11-15:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15 ESV)

Here we catch a glimpse of that great and terrible day when the books will be opened, and the living and the dead will all come before the throne for judgement. Just try to imagine what this day will be like. All worldly pomp and recognition will be cast aside. The great men and women of history will stand next to the insignificant and no one will think anything of it because, for the first time in human history we will come to terms with our lowliness. Alexander the Great and Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler will stand before the Judge and not one of them will dare to boast of

their power or accomplishments. They will be like dust mites staring at the blazing sun! They will cower before the throne as they await the final verdict.

Just as he ascended into heaven, Jesus will return. And he will judge. Albert Mohler says here:

When he came the first time, he came in humility. But when he comes from where he is now seated at the right hand of God, things will be very different. When he comes as the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord, he will come as the One to whom every knee shall bow!¹

We will be judged by what was written in the books, according to what we have done. And if our names are not found written in the book of life, then we will be thrown into the lake of fire. That is what we are saying when we confess:

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

As I said at the beginning, this line is widely understood. I don't imagine that I've told you anything thus far that caught you by surprise. We KNOW this doctrine. But it seems to me that we struggle to believe it.

“Why would you say that pastor?” I say that because the truths that we are considering this morning are truths that should CHANGE us and MOVE us! For example, when your fire alarm goes off in the middle of the night, that demands action. You shake your spouse, you roll out of bed, you grab the kids, and you get out. There are some truths that demand action.

Truths That Demand Action

Having surveyed the basics, I want to lean in now to consider the truths in this doctrine that demand action. First, if you believe in the doctrine of the return of Christ and the final judgement, then you believe that:

1. The opportunity for repentance is coming to an end

¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 126.

That's a truth that demands action, isn't it? The Bible is clear about this. In 2 Peter 3, we read:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3:9-10 ESV)

The only reason why the final judgement has not yet taken place is because God is patient. But we must not be careless with this gift. God is patient, but nevertheless, the day of the Lord WILL come! And it will come like a thief.

So, are you living like you believe this truth? If Christ were to return at this very moment, would you be ready? Some of you listening right now are living in blatant, unrepentant sin. You confess that Jesus is Lord with your mouth, but your life tells a very different story, and you know it. But you think that you have time. You are young and healthy, and you assume that you will have the opportunity tomorrow, or next week, or next year to finally let go of this sin that you have been holding onto. The fire alarm is blaring, the smoke is pouring in under the door, but you are carelessly assuming that you can squeeze in a few more hours of sleep.

In his patience, he is waiting.

And your carelessness – your unbelief – is not only putting your own soul in jeopardy, but it is also endangering your kids! What do you think it says to your children when they see mom or dad hanging onto their sin in spite of God's clear warnings? I'll tell you what it says: It says that sin is not so bad, and God is not so holy, and Jesus is not returning anytime soon, and the final judgement is nothing to fear. If your daughter came to your bed and said, "Mom, the fire alarm is going off and the smoke is filling the hallway" who of you would say, "Go back to bed dear. We still have lots of time"? And yet, that is EXACTLY what we are doing every time we make peace with our sin! Please hear me right now: This game that you are playing with sin is eternally dangerous for you and for everyone you love. You might be right. You might still have some more time. Maybe you will squeeze out the window before time runs out. But do your kids have more

time? Have you considered the danger that you are exposing them to by pretending that the day of judgement is something to take lightly?

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31 ESV)

His patience affords you the opportunity to let go of your sin and live. He does not wish that any should perish and so he has left a window open for repentance. But we don't know how long this window will be open. He will come like a thief in the night, at which point the opportunity for repentance will be over. And that is a terrifying truth because:

2. Those who are not found in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire forever

And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:15 ESV)

Along with death and hades, and the devil and his angels, at the final judgement, anyone who has not surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ will be cast into the lake of fire. Jesus said this himself. In Matthew 24, he warns us:

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. (Matthew 24:31-33 ESV)

A few verses later we read:

⁴⁶ And these will go away into **eternal** punishment, but the righteous into **eternal** life. (Matthew 24:46 ESV)

Both heaven and hell – both the punishment and the reward – will be eternal.

Again, I suspect that most of you would give intellectual affirmation to this truth. You have to do some hermeneutical gymnastics to try to deny this doctrine and, by and large, people who do hermeneutical gymnastics don't stick around very long in our church family.

You know this truth. But Christian, do you believe it? Because this is a truth that DEMANDS action!

If I woke up one night and realized that my neighbor's house was on fire, I would fly out of bed and I would get there. I would fly out of the house in my jammies, I would sprint into the smoke, and I would do whatever it takes until my neighbor was safe. I would. And so would you.

And yet, Jesus is telling us here that our neighbors are standing on the brink of an eternity in hell, and we are so often unmoved. Why is it that I would run into a burning building to save the lives of my neighbor and his family yet I'm unwilling to walk across the road, knock on the door and share the gospel for the sake of their eternal souls?

Either I am a heartless, selfish coward, or I don't believe the things that I say I believe. There's probably a bit of both, if I'm being honest.

Many of you have heard the story of Jim Elliot. He left behind his comfortable life in Portland, Oregon to bring the gospel to people who had never heard it. He had been told of the "Aucas" – a notoriously violent, unreached tribe in Ecuador – and he couldn't shake the obligation he felt to do whatever he needed to do to share Christ with them.

After years of preparation and training, he finally made contact with the Aucas. His initial encounters were friendly and promising. But, on January 8, 1956, the tribe turned on Elliot and his fellow missionaries. All five men were murdered. Famously, Jim's wife Elizabeth went on to make contact with the Aucas. She forgave the men who murdered her husband and even developed a friendship. In the end, the gospel was widely received.

Stories like that of the Elliots shock us. But, if this doctrine is true, then why is that story so exceptional? Do you know what should be shocking? The countless stories in the church of how Bobby worked for his whole life and saved up all his dollars so that he could retire young and buy a big old house outside of town where he could enjoy his privacy and live a life of ease and comfort for the rest of his days. THAT should shock us, shouldn't it? Jim and Elizabeth Elliot simply lived like people who believe the Bible. In Jim's diary, he wrote:

May we who know Christ hear the cry of the damned as they hurtle headlong into the Christless night without ever a chance... May we shed tears of repentance for those who we have failed to bring out of darkness.²

What did Jesus say before he ascended? Do you remember? He said:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

“I’m going,” Jesus said, “But I will be back. And I’m leaving you with POWER! And I’m entrusting you with an ASSIGNMENT.”

Church, I want you to do something right now. I assume that most of you are watching this in your living room or on a portable device of some sort. I want you to get up off of the couch and to walk over to your window. Look outside. How many houses do you see? How many people live in those houses? I wonder, do you know their names? I wonder, has anyone ever told them that they will one day stand before the God of the universe? Do they know that their sin separates them from God? Do they know that Jesus died so that they could be forgiven? Do they know that their names are not currently written in the book of life? Do they know that whether or not they will spend an eternity in hell or an eternity in heaven depends solely and entirely upon whether or not they have placed their trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? Do they know?

Can you imagine standing next to them at the final judgement and hearing them say, “God, I DIDN’T KNOW!” Look out that window. Who’s going to tell them? Here’s the real question: If you believe what you say you believe, how is it even possible that you have not told them yet? This is a truth that demands action.

Finally, if you believe in the return of Christ and the final judgement, then you believe that:

3. We will all be judged for our works

² Nate Saint as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1983), 290.

I suspect that this point doesn't sound quite right as you hear it. Some verses are probably springing quickly to your mind. Ephesians 2:8-9, for example, says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹**not a result of works**, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV)

You say: "I'm saved by GRACE through FAITH! Not by WORKS!" And of course, you are exactly right. You are not *saved* by works. If your name is written in the book of life, it is there because of your faith in JESUS' work on your behalf. Correct! You are not *saved* by works.

But you need to know that you will be *judged* for your works. Look again at that scene in Revelation 20:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, **according to what they had done**.¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, **according to what they had done**. (Revelation 20:12-13 ESV)

There is a book of life – the book where the names of the blood-bought people of God are written – and only those whose names are in that book will be saved. But we also see here that there are other books, and these other books record the works that we have done. And we will be *judged* for these works. Not with regard to our salvation – that was secured for us by Christ – but with regard to our reward. The New Testament seems to suggest that God will reward us in heaven in direct proportion to our works here on earth. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3 we read:

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages **according to his labor**. (1 Corinthians 3:8 ESV)

Likewise, in Matthew 6, Jesus says:

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you,

they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And **your Father who sees in secret will reward you.** (Matthew 6:1-4 ESV)

For some reason, Christians tend to bristle at this aspect of the final judgement. There seems to be some instinct inside of us that longs for complete and absolute equality of outcome. But that's just not what we see in the Bible. God has called us to labour in His vineyard. He has called us to be His witnesses to the world and to use every opportunity afforded to us to further the spread of the gospel in the world. Some people work hard at that. Others coast. If they are in Christ, both will spend an eternity in glory! Both will enjoy the uninterrupted presence of God forever! Nobody will be unhappy in heaven! But will they both receive the same reward? Let's look again at 1 Corinthians 3:

If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though **he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.** (1 Corinthians 3:14-15 ESV)

Some people will be saved, but they will pass into heaven like a man just barely escaping the fire. They were saved by grace through faith, but the fruit in their life was microscopic. They largely ignored the commands to bear witness, they frequently neglected the opportunities that they were presented with, they sat on their spiritual gifts, they hoarded their money, they lived a life of ease and comfort and, as a result, they accomplished very little for the kingdom of God. Paul tells us here that some people will be like that. But they will not receive the same reward as, say, Jim Elliot.

We will be judged by our works.

To that end, I want to spend the little time that we have left thinking through how we ought to prepare ourselves for that final judgement.

Preparing For The Final Judgement

First and foremost:

1. Make sure your name is written in the book of life

I hope that everything I have said thus far has made this absolutely clear, but just in case someone is listening this morning who has not yet surrendered their life to Jesus Christ, I want to say this again: The final day of judgement will be a day of wrath and destruction for you unless you let go of your sin and place your trust in Jesus. He is the only way of salvation. Jesus said:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.
(Mark 1:15 ESV)

To repent is to let go of your sin. Acknowledge that you have dishonored and disobeyed God and leave those old ways behind you. And then believe. Believe that Jesus lived the perfect life that you could never live. Believe that he died on the cross to pay for your sin. Believe that he broke the chains of sin and death for you and that he proved it when he rose out of the grave on the third day! Believe that he ascended into heaven and that he is right now seated at the right hand of the Father representing and praying for you. Believe that Jesus is enough and that he is your only hope.

It is by grace you are saved through faith. Place your trust in him today and your name will be written in the book of life.

And once you have done that, with an eye to the eternal kingdom that lies in store:

2. Invest your time, talent and treasure in things that eternally matter

Flip with me in your Bibles to Matthew 24. After Jesus told his disciples that he would return again to judge, he used a series of parables to teach them how they ought to live in light of his looming return. We don't have time to unpack each of those parables this morning, but I think we have summarized them with this heading.

In each of the parables, Jesus teaches us that wise servants use their time, talents and treasure to prepare themselves for the master's return. To those who are found faithful, the master will say:

Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:21b ESV)

But to those who are found to be negligent – those who wasted their time, neglected their talents and hoarded their treasures – the master will say:

cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30 ESV)

Christian, what are you living for? How are you making use of the time that God has entrusted to you? Are you raising up disciples? Before Jesus left, he called us to be his witnesses to the world. How are you doing with that? Is your life – your work, your words, your priorities, your example – testifying to the transformative power of the gospel? Are you investing your time, your talent and your treasure in gospel witness? Because that's your assignment, Christian!

And he's also called us to invest in one another. Jesus said:

‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, **as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.**’ (Matthew 25:34b-40 ESV)

The time that you invest reaching out to your isolated brothers and sisters in Christ eternally matters. The talent that you invest making a lasagna for that new mom eternally matters. The treasure that you invest supporting that missionary in South Africa eternally matters. David Platt writes:

A heart that has truly trusted in Christ and a life that is truly longing for Christ will be consumed with serving men and women who are in Christ.³

³ David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 336.

We could go on for days describing what life ought to look like in light of this doctrine. Because the reality is, it is going to look different for each and every one of us.

Hold out your hand. Think about all that God has entrusted to you. He positioned you in one of the wealthiest nations the world has ever known. He has given you unique talents and abilities. He has put particular people in your life. One day, you will stand before King Jesus – who’s hands will still bear the scars of his crucifixion – and you will hold out your hand. You will give an account for what you have accomplished with the time, talents and treasure that he entrusted to you.

Are you ready? Every time we revisit this doctrine, it should cause us to do an audit. Look at that family calendar. Look at that budget. Look at those priorities. Because one day, Jesus will open those books. Live in such a way that the judge will say:

Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. (Matthew 25:21b ESV)

Who is sufficient for these things? To that end, let’s join together in prayer.