

The Apostles' Creed: He will come again to judge... (12)

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord

*Who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell*

The third day He rose again from the dead

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty

He will come again to judge the living and the dead

I believe in the Holy Spirit

The holy catholic Church; the communion of saints

The forgiveness of sins

The resurrection of the body

And the life everlasting

- With this study we come to the end of the core section of the Apostles' Creed, which has dealt with the person and work of Jesus Christ. By way of review, we'll mention again that the Creed is deliberately Trinitarian in structure—having a section on the Father, a section on the Son, and a section on the Holy Spirit. And within this middle section on the Son of God, there is also a microstructure, which divides the work of Christ along the lines of the past, present, and future of His person and work: He *was*, *is*, and *will*.
- He **was** conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, dead and buried—descended into hell—rose again from the dead, and He ascended into heaven. He **is** seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He **will** come again to judge the living and the dead. Thus we can see that this middle section of the Creed covers the whole life and work of Christ, and that His whole life and work have been, and are, essential to the Christian Faith.
- There are two main matters considered in this final line of the middle section and they are the second coming of Christ and the great, final Judgment.
- Just as it was with the first coming of Christ—men began to question the promise of His coming—so too with the second coming of Christ. When we get impatient—and when God does not do things according to our sense of time—we tend to lose faith and we begin to reconstruct our thinking according to our understanding and not according to His revelation. Thus Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:2-10,

...you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, 3 knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." 5 For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, 6 and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. 8 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 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.

- As we considered in the last study, the second Coming of Christ is directly connected to the ascension of Christ. Particularly important here is the statement of the angel to the disciples who witnessed Christ's ascension (Acts 1:11), "*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.*" The angel can speak with a bit of credulity here because Jesus had already told them (John 14:28-29), "*You heard Me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.'*"
- A real absence requires, calls for, and anticipates a real return. The great hope—above and beyond any progress that we hope for in the here and now—is that Jesus will come again to set the world to rights. The book of Revelation chronicles real victories and real afflictions of the Church, but the closing prayer is that which should be perpetually on our lips, *Come, Lord Jesus!* (Rev. 22:20).
- Indeed, if we lose sight of His real absence—and therefore devalue His real return—we will fall into idolatry. We will covet (cf. Col. 3:5) what we have not yet been given and progressively lose patience as we wait for the Lord and His return. Unable to walk by faith now—unable to live in the tension of the now and the not yet—we will look for, and try to create, heaven here, and, we will increasingly neglect our duty to

proclaim to the world that Jesus will come again and they will have to stand before Him and give an account. Having hope in Jesus only for this life (e.g. as a political tool, as an elixir of health problems, as the conduit for a happy family and good self-image), we will have become of all people *most to be pitied* (1 Cor. 15:19).¹

- In fact, it could be argued that if it were not for this line in the Creed, Christianity would not be so objectionable to the world. After all, people do not so much reject the idea of there being a God who created, a spiritual dimension, resurrection and life-after-death, heaven, etc. It is the idea of being held accountable for our actions, being judged, and answering to an external, divine standard that is intolerable to mankind.
- But Jesus is coming again *to judge the living and the dead*. That means that all mankind—and even every angel—that has ever existed will stand before the judgment seat of God and be recompensed (lit. rewarded) according to their deeds. Small and great, old and young, sinner and saint will stand before the Son and He will (perfectly) declare and deliver the final verdict upon every soul: “*He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.*” (Acts 17:31), “*The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.*” (John 5:22).
- This is a judgment that will be according to, but not based upon, our deeds. The final judgment is based upon the relationship one has with the Judge—Jesus Christ. If He knows you, He will declare, “*...inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.*” (Matt. 25:34), but if He does not know you He will declare, “*Depart from Me...*” (Matt. 25:41).
- Therefore we say that these verdicts are rendered **on the basis of** the righteousness of God, which Christ fulfilled on behalf of His people, in His perfect obedience to the will of the Father. These verdicts are rendered **in accordance with** the personal actions of the individual undergoing judgment on that day. The distinction being made here is further elaborated on by our theologians:

“...the general drift of Scripture is in favour of the doctrine that a man shall reap what he sows; that **God will reward every one according to, although not on account of his works.**” (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Part III, Chapter 18.7)

“In Matt. 25, the reprobate are condemned because they have not performed to God’s suffering children acts of beneficence and charity, and the righteous acquitted because they have. It may be briefly remarked here, that while sinners will be condemned strictly on the merit of their own conduct, saints will be acquitted solely on the merit of Christ. **They are rewarded according to, not because of the deeds done in the flesh.**...But the purpose of God in the judgment is to evince the holiness, justice, love, and mercy of His dealings to all His subjects. But as they cannot read the secret faith, love and penitence of the heart, the sentence must be regulated according to some external and visible conduct, which is cognizable by creatures, and is a proper test of regenerate character.” (Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 849)

“The norm according to which Christ will pronounce judgment upon individuals is the gospel revealed by him, whereby **Christ will consider man’s works as the fruits and proofs of his faith or unbelief in himself.**” (Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 704)

“**The godless will be judged according to and on account of their works, the godly according to their works of faith, but not on account of their works.**” (Johanannes Wollebius, *Christianae Theologiae Compendium*, p. 160)

“...this Judgement is ‘most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect because then their full deliverance shall be perfected...[Art. 37, *Belgic Confession*]’...**Their acquittal does not rest upon the works that they have done, but only upon the righteousness of Christ. Nevertheless, the good works they have done by faith shall be remembered and rewarded.**” (G.H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, p. 568)

... ‘Another book’ shall be ‘opened, which is the book of life’ (Rev. 20:12). In this the names of the elect are written, as Christ said to His disciples (Luke 10:20), ‘Your names are written in heaven.’ This book contains God’s gracious and unchangeable purpose, to bring all the elect to eternal life; and that, in order thereto, they be redeemed by the blood of His Son, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and raised up by Him at the last day without sin. It is now lodged in the Mediator’s hand ... Then shall the Judge pronounce this blessed sentence on the saints, ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (Matt. 25:34) ... **This sentence is passed on the saints, ‘according to their works’ (Rev. 20:12); but not for their works, nor for their faith, as if eternal life were merited by them ... They were redeemed by the blood of Christ, and clothed with His spotless righteousness, which is the proper cause of the sentence ... And the saints will so far be judged according to such works, that the degrees of glory amongst them shall be according to these works.** (Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, pp. 413-18)

- It is through the portal of this final judgment and declaratory vindication before the whole world, that we come into the full possession of the last installment of our redemption, thus this is a critical part of our faith.

¹ See Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*, WJK (2008)