

Let Us Welcome The Last Judgment.

Text: Acts 17:30-31

1) God Has Appointed Jesus To Judge The World

Suggested Hymns:

2) The Judgement

486, 341, 488, 492, 490

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Acts 17:30-31, 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.”* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Today we are continuing our series on the Nicene Creed. Part 9 focuses on the words, *And He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.*

Our text is the end of a famous sermon. It ended with these words, *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.* It ended here, and the audience left, some people mocked in derision, but others said, *“We will hear you again on this matter.”*¹

Perhaps you remember it. St Paul’s sermon to the men on Mars Hill in Athens, with its famous introduction, *“I perceive that in all things you are very religious.”*

St. Paul seemed to have his audience right with him; he reached their national pride, he quoted their beloved poets, he got on a common footing between the Christian believer and the Gentile unbeliever by pointing out the common impulse to worship God.

But then he said something that separated the believers from the unbelievers: the resurrection from the dead, and the judgment of God that ushers in the next world.

Christian believers have taught themselves to ponder the Last Judgment patiently, in fact to welcome it, as we recite it in our creeds. So *let us welcome the Last Judgment*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. God Has Appointed Jesus To Judge The World.

We should not just point fingers at the people of Athens who walked out on St. Paul, because, our time, too, has its mockers at the very idea of the Last Judgment.

St. Peter saw them coming long ago as we read in 2 Peter 3:3-4, ³ *scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, ⁴ and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."*

Actually they are not ready to believe that this present world is due to end, and so they try to convince themselves that God did not make it in the first place. Christians are not surprised that people find the idea of the Last Judgment unappealing, for it is an article of faith, they say, something that you believe without any more proof than the Word of God.

"He shall come with glory to judge the living and the dead" — this is the end and climax of the summary of our faith concerning Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Lord.

A bit of the scoffer, a throb of littleness of faith, hangs behind in every Christian too. Many of us just do not bother thinking about the Last Judgment, about the end of the world and the resurrection of our own bodies on that day.

We are ready to say the words out loud when we confess our faith in the language of the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed; but we don't really live and think as if this were our destination, except in the moments, which recur more and more frequently as we become older, or as we stand at the coffin of our departed dear ones and friends, when we face the meaning of the end of life.

Right here we have our finger on what causes us to obscure the thought of the end of time: It is the Last Judgment. We can live with God as Creator and Preserver; we are willing to remember that He gave His Son to redeem us from sin and death.

But our own death must still come; and death is not just death, but death is God's judgment; it brings us to this final accounting. The more frankly we face that accounting, the more we realise that our plea must be guilty.

We have been put into the world by God to live by His gift of life to us and to exert that life for His purposes. And we know we have often failed, both in the faith to draw on His power and in the love for people by which we put His power to work. It is possible to be complacent when ignorant of God's plan, but God does not leave us in ignorance. We know what is coming.

Hence it is not the easiest thing in the world to welcome the Last Judgment. St. Paul said it takes repentance, and that means a mind that reaches out beyond the here and now, the physical and the tangible, into the life of God.

We cannot have this repentant heart and mind of ourselves, but God has reached out of His unseen world with His incarnate Word of love, His own dear Son. *"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."*² In Jesus Christ God redeemed the world and made us His children again.

But the story is not over. God has appointed this same Son of His, on a day which He has already fixed, to have the world judged. Our text says that *He has given assurance of this to all by raising [Jesus] from the dead.* This is not a thing to turn away from in fear, to shrug off with a mood of escape. Rather this is the climax of God's plan. So let us think it all the way through!

2. The Judgement

When Jesus told His forecast of the Last Judgment, He said that people would be gathered before Him in two great consignments, the sheep and the goats, and the latter would have to go into everlasting fire.

We read in Matthew 25:31-46,³¹ *"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.* ³² *"All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.* ³³ *"And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.*

³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of 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 took Me in; 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 ‘When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ ‘Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’*

⁴¹ *“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: ⁴² ‘for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁴³ ‘I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’*

⁴⁴ *“Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵ “Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶ “And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

What of the sheep and the goats? Is it not the helpful and kind people, who are going to get the approval of Christ on Judgment Day to enter into His glory?

Those are hard words. They could take right out of our heart any readiness to welcome the Day of Judgment. They make us want to join the people of Athens who muttered, *“We will hear you again on this matter.”*

The Last Judgment seems a most gruesome thing to contemplate. What earthly value is there in a religious exercise that ponders the destruction of people like ourselves — perhaps of ourselves?

The point is that, the Last Judgment is not at this moment; but now we are remembering what we say we believe when we confess our Creed, and now we are in the period of time and grace, of which our text speaks. Now is the time

for grasping the meaning of God so that we do not fall, but stand in the Judgment.

Indeed there are people who shall fall in the Last Judgment. But the very word “judgment” in Bible language is helpful here; it does not only mean “condemnation” but also “rescue” and “vindication.”

Jesus also describes the Last Judgment in even plainer terms in John 5:27-30, God *has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.* ²⁸ *“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 who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

³⁰ *“I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.*

But St. Paul in our text said more than that Jesus would judge the world justly, that everybody will get what is coming to him. He said, “God *will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.*”

We read in Psalm 96:13, ¹³ *For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, And the peoples with His truth.* The psalm couples righteousness and truth. God’s truth is His faithfulness in making His promises come true, in being the God who wants us to be righteous, rather than a God who likes to punish people when they fail.

This is what historians call Luther’s tower experience, that suddenly it dawned on him that God’s righteousness does not mean His perfect behaviour, but it means His strong desire to be favourable to us, to rescue us, to make us His children again.

Therefore Jesus prefaces the description of the Last Judgment which we heard a moment ago with these words, ²⁴ *“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.* ²⁵ *“Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.* ²⁶ *“For as the*

Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, ²⁷ “and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.”³

The Last Judgment, you see, is the last act of a rescue operation that began in the mind of God before He ever created the world. He carried it out by sending His Son into the world to redeem it. The Son completed it on the cross and the Father signalled His approval by raising Jesus from the dead as our text says. The climax is when the Son gathers His people before Him to usher in the new life, which is His final and greatest gift.

It is a gift. You can do nothing else with it than receive it with faith and trust. When the tax collector in Jesus’ famous parable about how a person is made righteous in the sight of God turned to Him in faith, his phrase was, ‘**God, be merciful to me a sinner!**’ This is the essence of the faith that makes a person righteous and has him stand in the Final Judgment too. It is the confidence that God is merciful, that He does not become merciful and forgiving because we believe in Him, but that we believe in Him because we know He is already forgiving and merciful.

And this we know because the One who redeemed us is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whom He sent to die for us. Jesus is also the One who speaks the final verdict over us at the day we call the Last Day, but which is also the First in a new world, that One is the same Jesus Christ.

So let us welcome the Last Judgment. But what keeps us from doing it? For the men of Athens it was ignorance. They just did not know about it, and when they heard, they decided they would rather not think about it. We do not have their brand of ignorance, but we can have their brand of disregard.

How can we banish it, or surmount it? Frighten ourselves with the realisation that an accident on the highway after church, or a heart attack, or a bomb may bring us face to face with that Day of Judgment at any moment? Probably not.

Better is Jesus’ counsel which is to realise that we are already being brought from death to life right now. We must realise that the alternative between death and life, does not come at Judgment Day for the first time, but the alternative is already now.

Jesus Christ died and rose again so that we might be baptised into that death and into that resurrection. The Word of God's mercy in Jesus Christ must be told from person to person, from generation to generation, in word and hymns and print and conversation, in the household and between friends, and at work and at play.

That process is not just the remembering of a kind young Man long ago who died an untimely death, but it is jumping into the midstream of God's great saving action, He reached out to us with His favour in Jesus Christ.

When the Last Day comes, Jesus says, His people will be surprised at all the things He will remember that they had done for one another while on earth, the acts of nurturing their risen company along through every peril of weakness and hardship and persecution.

He will remember them because they had been members of His body while on earth, and therefore He welcomes them into eternal life because they are still in membership with Him. We need not fear because as the Head has risen first He will not leave His members dead.⁴

But one thing we will not be surprised at, even though we can imagine it only faintly is the greatness of God's love. Then like the last AMEN to a mighty service of worship, He will have His Son Jesus Christ declare us free and acquitted, forever rescued from the waywardness and the weariness of our earthly journey.

That Word of forgiveness we have learned to listen to, already in these marching years, helps us on our way. It speeds our feet and gives us new breath and courage and helps us welcome the final day of this life and the first day of the new one, the day of God's rescue in Christ.

And He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. Let us welcome it together! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Acts 17:32

² John 1:14

³ John 5:24-26

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:20-23