



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

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- 50 **Q.** *Why the next words: "and is seated at the right hand of God"?*
A. Christ ascended to heaven, there to show that he is head of his church, and that the Father rules all things through him.
- 51 **Q.** *How does this glory of Christ our head benefit us?*
A. First, through his Holy Spirit he pours out his gifts from heaven upon his members. Second, by his power he defends us and keeps us safe from all enemies.
- 52 **Q.** *How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?*
A. In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all his chosen ones he will take along with him into the joy and the glory of heaven.

Hebrews 1 tells us that after making purification for sins, Jesus "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (3-4). It's striking imagery if you think about it. Picture an attorney making his closing arguments to the jury, and then after a crescendo of rhetoric he says, "I rest my case" and sits back down next to his notes. Or imagine a carpenter working from sun up to sun down, as he sweats and pounds and labors on his feet to repair a damaged roof. Then at the end of a long, hot day, he climbs down the ladder, takes a look at his finished work and takes a seat for the first time since breakfast. Or better yet, think of a mom who has had no time for herself all day. She's made meals, cleaned the house, changed diapers, folded clothes, helped with homework, played in the backyard, raced to the grocery store, and now finally has the kids snoozing in their beds. She walks wearily down the stairs and for the first time since she woke up 14 hours ago, she sits down. In all three illustrations, sitting down is more than an act of rest. It is representative of completion. All that was needful has been accomplished.

That's why it's thrilling to think that Jesus is *seated* at the right hand of God. His work is finished. He accomplished all that was needful for our salvation. And having shown himself to be the victor over sin, death,

and the devil, it is given to him to sit, not in any old place, but at the place of honor and exaltation at God's right hand. Jesus Christ has been given a name above every name and all things have been placed under his feet (Eph. 1:20-22). All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Matt. 28:18). He is the head of the body, the church (Col. 1:18). And as our exalted head, Christ defends us, protects us, and pours out his gifts upon us through the Holy Spirit (Q/A 51).

The last line of the "Jesus" section of Apostles' Creed confesses that Christ is coming again "to judge the living and the dead." The Catechism, in keeping with its overall theme, asks "how does Christ's return...*comfort* you." I love how relentlessly devotional the Heidelberg Catechism is. Ursinus and Frederick and the rest did not want an esoteric textbook to enlarge the mind, but a compendium of biblical truth to enflame the heart. We ought to love theology because we love God, we love our salvation, and we love the gospel. The more we know about all three the more we find comfort in Jesus Christ alone. Anyone who thinks theology is just idle word games or pointless border-guarding has completely missed the point. The doctrines in the Catechism and the Creed are for the nourishment of our souls. We aren't interested in mental gymnastics. That's why we are asked: How do creation and providence *help us* (Q. 28)? How

does the holy conception and birth of Christ *benefit you* (Q. 36)? What *further advantage* do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross (Q. 43)? How does Christ's resurrection *benefit us* (Q. 45)? How does Christ's ascension to heaven *benefit us* (Q. 49)? How does the resurrection of the body *comfort you* (Q. 57)? How does the article concerning life everlasting *comfort you* (Q. 58)? And in summary, what *good* does it do you, however, to believe all this (Q. 59)? The Catechism is for you, not against you! So away with all this slanderous nonsense about theology as cold, lifeless, impersonal propositions. Creeds are for our comfort. Doctrines are for our delight.

Which brings us back to Question 52: How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you? That's a good question, because most of don't think about coming judgment as an unspeakable comfort. But for those whose only comfort in life and in death is that they are not their own, but belong body and soul to their faithful savior Jesus Christ, his return is their blessed hope (Titus 2:13).

The second coming comforts the believer in at least three ways. First, Christ's return means full and public acquittal for his people. I love the way the Catechism puts it: "I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me." The coming judge has himself already been judged. We don't have to fear standing trial, because the judge has already stood trial in our place. Though we are guilty as sin (literally), there is no sentence left to be handed down. Our crimes have already been paid for. When you stand before the holy Son of God at the end of the age and all your deeds and thoughts are laid bare for the world to see—all your petty jealousies, all your lustful glances, all your murderous thoughts, all your self-absorbed days—there will still be nothing to fear. There is no chance that Christ will look you up and down and cry out: "Curse this one", because he already became the curse for us. For those who belong to Christ, the verdict has been handed down once, and it can never be repeated again. We can no more be condemned at the throne of God's judgment than God can condemn himself a second time.

The return of Christ also means vindication for God's people. All Christ's enemies and ours—our real enemies who oppose us because they oppose the gospel, not the "enemies" we can't get along with or hate without cause—will be condemned to everlasting punishment. That there is a hell seems pretty obvious from Scripture.

Jesus mentions it often. Hell is the place of smoke and fire, worm and wailing, darkness and gnashing of teeth. Hell is a place of eternal conscience punishment ("the evil ones...shall be made immortal" says Belgic Confession Article 37) where the worm never dies (Isa. 66:24), the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:48), and the smoke of their torment never ceases (Rev.14:11). Jesus himself teaches us that the punishment in hell endures for as long as life endures in heaven, which is to say, forever (Matt. 25:46).

But how, you ask, is this any sort of comfort? The thought of everlasting punishment is sobering and tough for postmodern westerners to swallow. But before we discard the doctrine or (more likely) push it to the side with embarrassment, consider the following: 1) Discomfort with hell often stems from deep-seated disbelief about the exceeding sinfulness of sin. 2) Discomfort with hell is to some degree culturally conditioned. Many cultures in the past and the present did not stumble over this doctrine as we do. I was recently talking with a kind, sincere Muslim who had no problem stating matter-of-factly "Obviously there's a hell. If everyone gets the same thing in the end, how is that fair?" 3) Without the possibility of punishment, mercy looks meaningless. 4) Hell is a matter of divine justice. If sin goes unpunished, God is not God and his universe will be eternally out of moral and spiritual whack. 5) It is possible that divine vindication is no comfort to us because we have no real enemies, have not suffered much at the hands of others, and our faith has cost us little. "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" rings hollow when your "enemies" are an overbearing mother-in-law and "the drive-by media." The cry sounds more palatable when your enemies are people with swords killing you and your family for being Christians (Rev. 6:10).

Third, the return of Christ means we will go with Christ into the glory of heaven. The coming of the judge means the coming of the end—the end of suffering, the end of depression, the end of cancer, the end of loneliness, and the end of sinning. No more night; no more tears; no more sea. But Christ's return also means a beginning—the beginning of ceaseless praise, the beginning of perfect communion with God, and the beginning of delight that increases forever. In short, the beginning of the joyful end that never ends.