

The Need for Creed, Pt. 7
From 3rd Day to J-Day Christians
Psalm 96; Acts 17: 30-31

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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

One of the most popular music groups in the world these days is the Dave Matthews Band. You can hear Dave’s songs frequently at football games, on television shows and in movies. Matthews is not only popular. He is also one of the most God-haunted secular musicians. There is a spiritual questioning and yearning in much of his music that touches a deep chord in our culture. Dave Matthews’ most recent album has a song that applies very well to our section of the Apostles’ Creed. The song “Funny the Way It Is” raises the issue of why the world is the way the world is, why in the midst of one’s suffering there is another’s joy. He sings,

Funny the way it is, if you think about it
Somebody's going hungry, and someone else is eating out.
Funny the way it is, not right or wrong
Somebody's heart is broken, and it becomes your favorite song

Funny the way it is, if you think about it
One kid walks 10 miles to school, another's dropping out.
Funny the way it is, not right or wrong
On a soldier's last breath his baby's being born.ⁱ

Why is the world the way it is? How do we make sense of the vast inequities among people? Why was I born here and not in an impoverished nation? Why did dementia strike my family but not yours? Is there any hope that it’s all going to get sorted out at the end?

That’s at the heart of today’s episode in the Jesus-story. We have before us the parts of the creed that speak about Jesus’ future. Last week, we saw that Jesus has ascended into heaven. He is there, at his Father’s right hand, still God and still a man, praying on behalf of his people. He is sending his Spirit to work out in the world and our daily lives the salvation he won for us. The Creed goes on to say “From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” From heaven, he will come again to this earth. And when he comes, there will be judgment. Now let’s translate the language a bit. He comes to judge *the quick and the dead*. This

does not mean that if you're *slow and alive*, you will escape! "Quick" means alive. It's an old meaning of the word, but a very lovely one. To be quickened is to be brought to life. To be *quick*, in this sense, means your blood is coursing through your veins, messages are speeding from your brain to your body, your lungs are incredibly rapidly exchanging poisonous carbon dioxide with life-giving oxygen. So, to be *quick* simply means to be alive. In other words, when Jesus returns to the earth, he will judge those who are alive in the world right then as well as those who have already passed away. Jesus will come as the Judge and then everyone must stand before him.

The second coming of Jesus to the earth is repeated frequently throughout the New Testament. If the descent into hell seemed kind of sketchy in Scripture, the second coming is glaring by contrast. There's no escaping this Christian hope. Let's just look at a few passages so you can see what I mean.

- Jesus himself said, "For the Son of Man is going to come with angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16: 27).
- The angel told the disciples as they watched Jesus ascending, "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).
- In Revelation we read, "Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen" (Revelation 1: 8).
- A frequently used worship word in the early church was *Maranatha!* which means "Our Lord, come!" (Romans 16: 22, Revelation 22: 20). The followers of Jesus longed for his return and prayed for it regularly.

Now, what does the coming of Jesus mean for us in daily life? Two weeks ago, we talked about being Third Day Christians. We discussed what life would look like if we lived vibrantly with the knowledge that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. Today we want to add another term; J-Day Christians. What happens to Christians who make the reality of Judgment Day an active part of the way we think as we live in the world? The bottom line is that the reality of Judgment Day is great news. I've got six quick points about what you get when you become a **J-Day Christian**.

1) Hope. The return of Jesus Christ to the world means that one day all this is going to be set right. This is very similar to the hope we have because Jesus broke

the power of death in his rising. It's the rest of the story. Evil will not have the last word. What is broken will be repaired. What is bent will be straightened. Psalm 9 declares, "For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever." J-Day Christians live in the hope that God has not forgotten the little ones in the blast zones, and the old ones on the discard heap, and the ones with distended bellies from hunger, and the ones who've been swindled and pillaged and abused and abandoned. No, we join in the joy of Psalm 96 which declares,

He will judge the peoples with equity.

[So] Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice

Let the sea roar and all that fills it;

Let the field exult, and everything in it!

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD,

For he comes, he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness,

And the peoples in faithfulness.

Psalm 96 is a song of great joy and hope. The basis for all this rejoicing is J-Day! Because God is coming to judge the world in fairness and faithfulness, we can have hope that all things will be set right one day. Evil is not going to get away with it. God is going to fix it. J-Day Christians are thus people of hope even in the darkest times, because we know how the story will end

2) Worth. The news that Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead means that we are accountable to God for our actions. That means we count! What we do has significance. What a despairing view of life for those who believe when you die, that's it. Nothing really matters because you're here today and gone tomorrow. What a desperate view if you believe the world will just keep on being the way the world is until a million years from now the sun explodes and burns us up. J-Day Christians have a very high estimate of the value of their words and actions. What we do matters to God, the creator of all things. If we are worth his judgment, then we are worth his regard and attention. My life is worth more than my little dog's or more than a rock in direct relation to how accountable I am for my life before God. We see this in the world all around us. Children who are not accountable to their parents are miserable. Nothing is expected and so they feel worthless. Children of high expectations, assuming these are just and fair, have a spring in their step and resilience in their spirits. J-Day Christians know how much a human life is worth.

3) Fear. From bad fear to good fear. Yes, J-Day Christians have a healthy fear of God. Jesus is coming back. Remember the feeling when your parents were out and you had been messing with their things and going through stuff in the pantry and making a mess in the kitchen. And all of a sudden you heard the car in the driveway. Their return evoked fear. So who doesn't get the willies reading a passage such as I Peter 4: 17, "For if it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" Of course, if you really want to stay up at night, read sweet Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. The criteria for heaven or hell in that parable is not even what you believe, but only what you have done or failed to do for the least of the least. Yikes. Sure, we have a healthy fear related to our accountability.

But here's the paradox, J-Day Christians can actually be free of fear in their lives. Trusting in the coming of Jesus to judge the living and the dead ends my fear. For one, as an elder said this week, "I'm really glad I know the judge!" Indeed, the Judge is our Redeemer. The coming King is our brother. If God turns out to be a different kind of God, that's not good for me. But if I'm a J-Day Christian, I lean my whole life on the truth of the story. The guy coming back to reign and rule is the guy who gave his life for me. The Judge is my Redeemer. So I am free from ultimate fear of what God will do to me as I trust in Christ.

But more, I am free now from fear of what man can do to me. The Judge is coming to set things right. I can be beaten, slandered, pummeled, robbed, divorced and abandoned in this world. But my Judge will come to sort things out. He will set all things right. No one can snatch me from his hand. J-Day Christians who fear God properly are fearless before the world.

4) Forgiveness. The reality of the judgment of Jesus is the basis on which I can be a forgiving person. This is so crucial to understand. If Jesus is not coming back, then I'm on my own to try to get vindication and justice. It's very hard for me to let you go if I think it's up to me to save face. If I have to establish respect all by myself in this world, then I'm going to be a revengeful, angry person. If I think you're just going to get away with it, then I can't let it go. But if I'm a J-Day Christian, I know that Jesus is coming back. He will take care of all issues related to justice. He will sort out what is right. He will take care of crimes committed against me. He will make sure that corrections are made, apologies issued, and inequities righted. That frees me now to lose without losing. I entrust myself to my faithful Creator and entrust you, even if you have wronged me to his justice and care. The coming of Jesus frees J-Day Christians to spend their lives in love.

5) Warning. The second coming of Jesus gives the church our gracious word of warning to the world. When Paul preached to the philosophers of Athens, he said, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because 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 by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17: 30-31). Right now, a window of grace is open. God has sent his Son to be the redeemer of the world. Those who turn to him in repentance and faith will be saved. Today is the day of salvation. This is the age of the message of the gospel to be preached. But when Jesus returns, it’s game over for this age. The window closes. Judgment begins.

In my heart, I would like to be a universalist. I would like to believe that God will save all people through the grace of Jesus Christ. And maybe he will. But I am a man under authority. I am not permitted to preach to you what is only speculation and hopeful thinking. The passages about the reality of judgment are too numerous. J-Day Christians know we have a word of warning to the world: Today is a day of salvation. Believe in Jesus and live in obedience to him. For once he returns it will be too late.

6) Mission. Finally, J-Day Christians are enthused with the mission of Jesus. We know he is returning and we know what is his vision for the new heavens and the new earth. That means we begin living as if it were so. We order our lives by kingdom values. We value the little ones, the unborn ones, the discarded, the elderly, the poor, the very earth itself the way Jesus does. We know what he intends for his creation. We seek to live that out in the way we do our business, enact laws, encounter people and conduct ourselves. Our mission is to pull the future into the present by the way we live now. J-Day Christians are visionaries. We are transformers and hope-givers, friends to the friendless and full of tender regard for all we meet.

Jesus is coming again to judge the quick and the dead. It’s the concluding episode in the Jesus-story affirmed by the Creed. So we join with Paul who said, “Christ we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1: 28-29). That’s the life of a J-Day Christian!

Study Questions

- What does the return of Jesus and his judgment have to do with questions about why the world is the way it is and how we make sense of current inequities?
- Why do you think there are so few J-Day Christians today?
- What is the connection between judgment and hope?
- How does the second coming of Jesus affect our sense of worth in this world?
- How does this episode of the Creed both cultivate fear and alleviate fear?
- What makes the reality of Judgment Day vital to my ability to forgive?
- Why is the church's word of warning a *gospel* warning?
- How does this plank of the creed shape the church's current mission?
- Why would J-Day Christians be more joyful than grim and mean?

ⁱ Dave Matthews, "Funny the Way It Is," from *Big Whiskey and the Groo Grux King* (New York: RCA, 2009).