

LESSON 30

Belgic Confession Article 37 The Last Judgment

General:

In this lesson we examine what will happen on the Day of Judgment, and we look forward to the glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. The Function of this Article

In this final article, the confession does not elaborately discuss all things possibly pertaining to the certain end of this world. It is directed towards the *return* of the Lord Jesus Christ and the glorification (even vindication) of the innocent righteous, many of whom have given their life for the testimony of Jesus.

Thus it is an appeal to the oppressing governments ("judges and civil authorities") yet to consider the plight of the faithful and not to store up for themselves the coming wrath of God.

It is also a comforting call to the saints to persevere in the true confession with a view to the great day when "their cause will be recognized as the cause of the Son of God."

2. The Return of the Lord

This article begins with the confession concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is this return which signals the day of judgment.

We note the following:

- a) the time of this return; appointed by the Lord, is "*unknown* to all creatures."

Acts 1:7, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority."

We therefore reject all the unspiritual "arithmetic" in which Adventist sects indulge in order to determine a specific year when the Lord will return. Without exception such calculations have proven to be false, while the very practice itself is sheer defiance of God's will.

We also believe that there will be only *one* return of Christ, and not *two* returns, as is the claim of *millennialism*. There are various forms of millennialism, but the basic set-up is as follows:

1. the *first* return of Christ, to establish the thousand years' reign, when Satan will be bound and believers will be raised from the dead and gathered (with regenerated Jews) in Jerusalem. This period is said to end with Christ's second ascension, and the "release" of Satan to execute a reign of terror.

2. the *second* return of Christ, leading to the last great confrontation and the final day of judgment.

Sectarians will endlessly argue about the times and places involved, but do agree on two returns of Christ.

The *Reformed* view concerning the "thousand years' reign" and the "binding of Satan" (Revelation 20) is simply that Christ rules supreme from His ascension to His return, and that Satan cannot conclusively guide the history of the world to prevent the gathering of Christ's Church. We believe that Christ will return only "when the number of the elect is complete" (see: 2 Peter 3:9).

- b) the *manner* of His return: Christ will return "corporally and visibly as He ascended, with great glory and majesty."

1 Thessalonians 4:16, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God."

Revelation 1:7, "Behold, He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him. . . ."

The Church is always to be directed towards this day and to live in conscious readiness for His coming.

1 Thessalonians 5:6, "Let us keep awake and be sober."

3. The Resurrection

The Day of Judgment will begin with the resurrection of the dead, of all the dead. We distinguish between the following:

- a) all the dead "will arise out of the earth, as their spirits are once again united with their own bodies in which they lived," Revelation 20:13
- b) those who are then *living*, "shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Thessalonians 4:17; 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52).

The confession does not state here where the souls of the believers shall be during the period between their death and resurrection. It does speak of the "spirits" again being united with "the bodies." In the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22, we do read, ". . . my soul, after this life, shall immediately be taken up to Christ, its Head." In accordance with Revelation 20:6, reformed scholars have called this "the *first* resurrection." The believers will consciously be with Christ in heaven, awaiting the final day of glory. This confession was attacked, among others, by Rev. B. Telder and Rev. C. Vonk, who taught that the believers are truly "dead" and thus have no communion with Christ. The ensuing controversy contributed to a schism in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The Scriptures clearly teach that the believers will be with Christ (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23; Revelation 6:9-11) and the above-mentioned heresy must therefore be termed a *reduction* of the power and promises of Christ.

4. The Day of Judgment

The day of judgment is for "all people, men, women and children, who ever lived" – none excluded – who will all "appear in person before this great Judge," Jesus Christ. The Scriptures teach that "the books" will be opened and that all the facts of our life (thoughts, words, and actions) will be duly presented as evidence of sin, Revelation 20:12. Also another book will be opened, the *Book of Life*, in which the names of God's children were written "before the foundation of the world," Revelation 13:8; 17:8.

The *righteous*, i.e., those who have believed and trusted in Jesus Christ and served Him truly, will then be vindicated. "Their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labour and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be made known to all . . ."

The *wicked* will be convicted by "the testimony of their own consciences and will become immortal, but only to be tormented in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41).

The *earth* ("this old world") will be purified by fire and flame (2 Peter 3:7) and a new world will be prepared for God's children, "a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

5. The Eternal Sabbath

For those who have confessed Christ's Name on earth, the Lord will intercede and confess "their names before God His Father and His elect angels," and they shall be "crowned with glory and honour," receiving their place on the new earth. This is a "gracious reward" for Christ's sake.

Both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession emphasize that we cannot presently imagine the glory and joy of this new life. Our whole life will then be a perfect worship of God, and therefore it is called the "eternal *Sabbath*" (see: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 38; Hebrews 4:9-11).

This glorious life will be *different* in many respects:

- a) we may see God ("they shall see His face," Revelation 22:4) since heaven and earth are unified
- b) "the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4); sorrow, pain, sickness, death and *sin* will be non-existent
- c) the relationships will not be as they were on this earth (Matthew 22:30)
- d) there will be no time or passing of time as we know it today ("night shall be no more," Revelation 22:5) but we receive eternity to praise and glorify God.

We long for the day when we may eternally serve God in perfection, and may live in complete harmony with all men. We await this day with joy, without fear – dreadful though it be – when we will be fully comforted in Jesus Christ, our Saviour. This longing is not of ourselves, but it has been stirred in us by the *Holy Spirit*.

The Spirit and the Bride say: Come.
Who will deliver me from this body of death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
M A R A N A T H A

QUESTIONS (Lesson 30):

1. What do you know about the time of Christ's return?
2. What do you know about the manner of this return?
3. What do we understand by "the thousand years' reign"?
4. What happens to those who are still living when Christ returns?
5. What was the heresy promoted, among others, by Rev. B. Telder?
6. Which books shall be opened on the day of judgment?
7. What can we say about the perfect life to come?

ASSIGNMENT:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 22.