"He Shall Come to Judge the Living and the Dead"
(Matthew 25:31-46 – Last Judgment – November 8, 2026)

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."*

Dear redeemed children of God, heirs of heaven through faith in His Son Jesus Christ:

A few minutes ago, we confessed our holy Christian faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed. We stated our belief in the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the section dealing with the person and work of the Son, Jesus Christ, we confessed: **"He Shall Come to Judge the Living and the Dead."** This is what Jesus teaches in our text. He describes how on the Last Day, **1) He will come in glory as Judge of all;** and **2) He will pronounce judgment based on evidence** of whether or not people believed in Him as their Savior.

1) He will come in glory as the Judge of all

Jesus begins to describe what every eye will see on that Day in verses 31-33: *"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. 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. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left."*

"The Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite way of referring to Himself. It reminds us that the first time He came into the world, He came in humility to save us from sin, death, and judgment. In the Apostles' Creed, we confess His humiliation in that He "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." As the Son of God, Jesus shared equal glory with His Father from eternity. Yet He humbled Himself to be conceived and born in our flesh. This was so that He could live under the Law God gave us, which we sinful humans have not kept; but as the perfect Son of Man, He fulfilled it all for our righteousness. He even humbled Himself to suffer and die on the cross for our sins, to win our forgiveness and peace with God.

After His humiliation Jesus was exalted, meaning that His human nature was now fully glorified with His divine nature. We also confess His exaltation in the Apostles' Creed: "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; from there He shall come to judge the living and the dead." Having redeemed us from sin and Satan, our exalted Savior first descend into hell to declare His victory. Then on Easter, Jesus showed Himself alive to His disciples, giving the proof by His resurrection that He truly had won forgiveness and eternal life for all. Finally, He ascended to the right hand of His Father, in that position of authority, where He rules over all things for the good of His Church.

As the Son of Man once ascended on the clouds, so He shall come again in glory as Judge of all. Jesus will judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42) – all who are still living on the earth when He comes, as well as all who have died. How all nations can be gathered before Him at once is beyond our understanding; but it is in His almighty power. Jesus said in John 5:28-29: *"Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."*

Jesus will separate believers from unbelievers as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. It will be instantaneous, for He already knows those who belong to Him by faith and those who stand apart in unbelief (2 Timothy 2:19). As the Good Shepherd, Jesus says: *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life"* (John 10:27-28). He has called us by His Gospel to faith and into His flock. He feeds our souls and leads us, day by day, through His Word and Sacraments. Therefore we know His voice. And Jesus gives us His promise in John 5:24: *"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 to life."*

2) He will pronounce judgment based on evidence

When Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead, He already knows we belong to Him by faith. But since it will be a public judgment before the world, He will pronounce judgment based on evidence of faith.

Jesus describes this in verses 34-40: *"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: 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; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 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.'"*

Many understand this wrongly. Does it teach that we are saved by our good works? No, for that would be inconsistent with all of Scripture. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: *"By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."* Salvation is a free gift of God, given to undeserving sinners only by faith in Christ. It cannot be earned by works. Yet where there is true faith, there will be works. As a good tree produces good fruit, faith produces good works (Matthew 7:17; Ephesians 2:10). So the King will point to the works of believers, not as the cause of their salvation, but as evidence of faith.

Notice how believers will be surprised that the King even took note of their works; even counting the least of their works as having been done to Him! "When did we do these things?" they ask. This shows that they had not put their faith in their works to save them. Their faith simply responded to the love Jesus first showed in giving His life to save them. They showed their love back to their Savior by loving those in need He put around them. Jesus takes this personally, as love shown to Him.

As believers, we understand their surprise. We confess our shortcomings in loving our neighbor as ourselves. Aren't there times when we have passed by those in need? Maybe they could have used help with some physical need. Maybe they needed a friend to listen and share their burden in time of sickness or distress. But we were too busy, focused on our selfish interests. How is it that, on the Last Day, heaven's King will not mention any sins of omission – the good we should have done, but we did not do? How is it that He will not mention any sins of commission – the bad we should not have done, but we did? How is it that heaven's King will have only praise for the good He sees in our lives?

It is because He has taken away all our sins and shortcomings by His sacrifice on the cross for us. And He has fulfilled all righteousness by the perfect life He lived for us. Jesus always did good to those in need – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, befriending to the lonely, even giving His life in love as the Savior for all people. All the good that He did, He did for you and me. Now by faith, we receive all that He worked out for us. As believers, we stand justified in Christ; and He sees only His righteousness upon us.

How different it will be for unbelievers, as Jesus describes them coming before the King in verses 41-45: *"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: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 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.' 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?' 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.'"*

Notice that unbelievers are offended that the King did not take note of their works. They accuse Him of unrighteous judgment, saying: "When did we *not* do these things?" By this, they show that they had put their faith in their own works to save them. Maybe they did many acts of charity, civic righteousness which the world applauded. But it had nothing to do with the only righteousness that counts before God, which is by faith in Christ alone. Since they boast in their own works as making them righteous and deserving of heaven, the King only needs to present evidence of their lack of faith. He points to ways they had not acted in love for Him, by loving even the least of His brethren.

Jesus concludes in verse 46: *"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."* Since unbelievers stand apart from faith in Christ, they appear before God in their sin-corrupted works and unrighteousness. So the King will say: *"Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels"* (vs. 41). They must share the fate of the devil, who deceived them by his lies, and whom they served in their impenitence and unbelief.

But since believers stand in Christ by faith, they appear before God cleansed by the blood of His Son, covered in His righteousness. So the King will say: *"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"* (vs. 34). Truly we are blessed by God the Father, who in love sent His Son to work out our salvation the first time He came into the world. We are blessed also because He sent His Spirit to work in us saving faith, making us heirs of His eternal Kingdom with Christ.

When Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead, it will be a great day for us. It is the day when we will see our Savior, who loved us so much that He gave His life to save us. It is the day when our Good Shepherd, who has called us as His own sheep and cared for us all along, will lead us into the green pastures and life-giving waters of His heavenly home. It is the day when our King will show us into His heavenly Kingdom, to live forever with Him in the mansions He has prepared for us in His Father's house (John 14:2).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.