

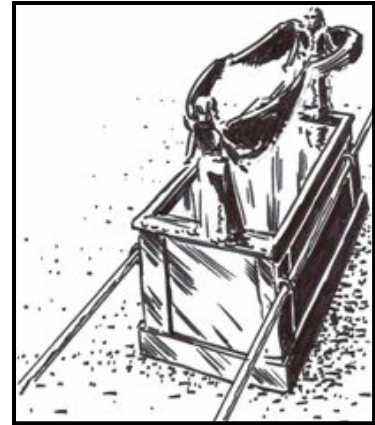


THE DAY OF JUDGEMENT

Reading: Matthew 25

God must be obeyed

When the people of Israel were in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle and make its furniture. This tabernacle (tent of meeting) was a special tent where God met with His people. The main item of furniture was the Ark of God, a gold-covered chest. The diagram shows what it might have looked like. Notice the poles for carrying it.



About 500 years later, King David decided to bring the Ark of God from a nearby place to his new capital city, Jerusalem, where it would be once again at the centre of Israel's worship. The Ark was placed on a new cart that was pulled by oxen and driven by a man called Uzzah. During the journey, the oxen stumbled and Uzzah put out his hand and took hold of the Ark to steady it. Suddenly:

"God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God" (2 Samuel 6:7).

Why was the punishment so severe, since it seems Uzzah was only trying to prevent the Ark of God from being damaged? God had said that the Ark must always be carried using the poles (Exodus 25:14). It was the symbol of God's presence and so should never be touched. The punishment for touching the Ark was death (Numbers 4:15). God is pure and holy and can only be approached in the way He has instructed. By touching the Ark, Uzzah disobeyed God's commands.

God is the Creator and Sustainer of all life and expects to be honoured and obeyed. We cannot be casual in the way we approach God. We must seek God in the way He has instructed, and not do what we think is right. Later, David said about Uzzah's death, *"the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not seek him according to the rule"* (1 Chronicles 15:13).

God is holy and great, and rightly demands honour and obedience

The day of judgement

One important lesson from the death of Uzzah is that God will punish those who refuse to honour and obey Him. For this reason the day of judgement will follow the resurrection at Christ's return. The apostle Paul wrote to believers at Corinth:

*"For we must all appear before **the judgment seat of Christ**, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, **whether good or evil**"* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

God is loving and merciful, but He is also a God of justice and truth. In Exodus 34:6,7 the Lord God is described as:

*"... a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, **but who will by no means clear the guilty** ..."*

The first part of this passage describes God's forgiveness; the second part shows that He will not forgive sinners who do not repent. Similarly, the apostle Paul talks about *"the kindness and the severity of God"* (Romans 11:22). Deuteronomy 29:18-20 shows that there are people God cannot forgive. As a God of justice, He will not ignore sin and allow it to go unpunished: He will punish those who refuse to honour and obey Him. Also, the only way that sin and the problems it causes can be completely removed from the earth will be for God to destroy the wicked.



The righteous Judge

God has given the work of judgement to Jesus Christ (John 5:25-30). 2 Timothy 4:8 describes the Lord Jesus as “*the righteous judge*” because he will judge with godly wisdom. People can only judge by what they see and hear, but the Lord Jesus knows people’s thoughts (John 2:24,25) and will make no mistakes. Isaiah 11 was written before the birth of Jesus and is a prophecy of his future work:

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isaiah 11:3,4).

Who will be judged?

The Lord Jesus Christ will not judge everyone who has ever lived. It is for God to decide who will be judged. The Bible tells us that people who have known and understood the Gospel, and therefore had the opportunity to do something about it, will appear before the judgement seat of Christ, to give account of their lives. From 2 Timothy 4:1 we realise that this will involve:

- the **dead** who have been raised, and
- people who are **living** when he returns.

So at his second coming the Lord Jesus Christ will summon for judgement people from all ages who have known and understood the Gospel. These will be people who have either:

- accepted God’s offer of salvation and tried to honour and obey Him; or
- accepted God’s offer of salvation but not followed His ways; or
- knowingly rejected God’s offer of salvation.

These are all people who have heard the call of the Gospel – that is, they have understood God’s offer of salvation and have had the opportunity to choose for themselves whether or not to accept it and follow the Lord Jesus. They will be judged on how they have responded in their lives. We are told in John 3:17,18:

*“... God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.**”*

What will happen?

We shall look now at what will happen to three classes of people: 1) those ignorant of God’s purpose, 2) the righteous, 3) the wicked.

1. People who have not heard about God’s offer of salvation

People who are ignorant of the Gospel will not be condemned for not accepting it. That would be unjust and unfair. So those that have died without hearing about God’s offer of salvation will not be raised.

*“And **many** (not all) of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt”* (Daniel 12:2).

The dead who are not raised will remain dead – they have perished and gone for ever. The prophet Isaiah wrote about people who will not rise from the dead:

*“O LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone we bring to remembrance. They are dead, **they will not live**; they are shades, **they will not arise**; to that end you have visited them with destruction and **wiped out all remembrance of them**”* (Isaiah 26:13,14).

Psalms 49 describes these people as being “*without understanding*” because they are ignorant of the Gospel, and it shows that they will perish like the animals:

*“Be not afraid when a man becomes rich ... For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him. For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed ... his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will **never***





again see light. Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish” (Psalm 49:16-20).

Of course, there will be many people who are living when Christ returns who do not understand the Gospel. They will not appear before the judgement seat of Christ. Those who survive the terrible time of trouble that will come upon the earth at the time of the end will be allowed to live as mortal people in God’s kingdom when Christ reigns as king. They will have an opportunity then to learn about the Gospel. However, those who do not survive will perish – they will die and remain in the grave for ever (see Lessons 7 and 11).

2. The people Christ accepts

Those who are accepted at the judgement seat of Christ will be given immortal life. They will be changed so that they share the nature of God Himself. Their minds will never again be tempted to think wrong thoughts – the battle against sin will be over. Their bodies will be immortal – they will never again feel pain or tiredness or any human weakness. It will be a time of great rejoicing for the faithful.

Because the apostle Paul had tried so hard to serve God faithfully he said,

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7,8).

3. The people Christ rejects

The Bible does not tell us the details of the punishment of those Christ rejects on the day of judgement. But we are told that they will realise how foolish they have been to throw away God’s wonderful blessings, and this will cause them agony of mind:

“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out” (Luke 13:28).

This shows that part of their punishment will be to see the glory of God’s kingdom and know that they will not be part of it. They will then die for ever.

In one parable Jesus compared the day of judgement to a harvest where the good corn (representing the righteous) is separated from useless weeds (the wicked). The corn is carefully preserved, but the weeds are destroyed in the farmer’s bonfire (Matthew 13:36-43). Paul taught the same lesson very plainly in his second letter to the Thessalonians:

*“... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who **do not obey the gospel** of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might ...”* (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

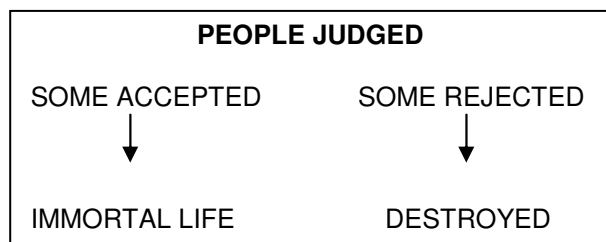
Hebrews 10:26,27 warns us that:

*“if we go on **sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth**, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgement.”*

Jesus also says,

“... but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:33).

People rejected by Jesus Christ will include those who have been baptized and belonged to the Christian community but have not performed *“deeds in keeping with their repentance”* (Acts 26:20). This is a warning for all of us!





Believers are servants of Christ

In New Testament times, if a man bought a slave, he would own that slave totally. The slave could no longer please himself. He had one task in life – to please his master. Baptized believers are to be like those slaves, with the Lord Jesus Christ as their Master. But we should obey because we love the Lord, not because we are afraid of him.

Jesus gave his life on the cross as a sacrifice to save us from sin. So Paul wrote to believers:

“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).

Because believers belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, they cannot please themselves. They are responsible to the Lord Jesus for the way they live. When he returns, Christ Jesus will reward the faithful, and punish those who have despised his ways.

Matthew 25:14-30 records a parable Jesus told about servants. The master said to his faithful servant:

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”

But the man who had ignored his master received a severe punishment:

“And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Read also Matthew 24:45-51.

Love or fear?

Some Bible verses warn believers not to be too confident about appearing before the judgement seat of Christ; other passages encourage them to be full of confidence. There is no real contradiction. No one can have confidence in their own righteousness, but true believers of the Lord Jesus can have total confidence in the saving power of God. Believers gradually learn to love God and place their trust in Him completely, for it is God's good pleasure to give them the kingdom if they continue to be faithful servants of Christ. 1 John 4:17,18 says:

“By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgement ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”

God loves us so much that we should want to do all we can to serve Him and to follow the example set by Jesus. If we love God in response, we will have nothing to fear.

Summary

1. The day of judgement will follow the resurrection at Christ's return.
2. The Lord Jesus, the righteous judge, will judge with godly wisdom.
3. Christ will summon for judgement people from all ages who have known and understood the Gospel – the living and the dead, the righteous and the wicked.
4. Those who are accepted by Christ Jesus will be given immortal life.
5. Those who are rejected will suffer agonies of mind and then die for ever.

A verse to learn: 2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

A chapter to read: 2 Corinthians 5

