

Judgment Day in the Bible

The concept of “judgment day” is found primarily in the New Testament, where there is reference to a time when God or the Messiah (or the Son of Man) will punish the wicked and redeem the righteous. References to the final day of judgment can also be found in earlier writings.

Old Testament

The background for this concept may be found in the Hebrew Bible, where God is regarded as the Judge of all the earth (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 9:7–8). God’s judgment is often invoked on individuals (Gen. 16:5) or nations (Judg. 11:27). Psalm writers looked for God to reward the righteous, whether individuals (Ps. 1:5–6), nations (Ps. 110:6), the needy and oppressed (Pss. 72:2–4; 103:6), or the whole world (Ps. 96:13). Many prophets also spoke of the “day of the Lord,” when God would punish nations for their wickedness (e.g., Obad. 15). Such judgment would also come upon Israel (Amos 5:18–20), Judah (Joel 1:15), and all the inhabitants of the earth (Zeph. 1:14–18). Elsewhere, Joel 2:30–32 and Malachi 4:5–6 suggest that those who repent beforehand may be spared. Specific expressions that might be taken as implying a judgment day include “on that day” (Isa. 24:21), “the days are surely coming” (Jer. 9:25; cf. Amos 4:2), or simply “then” (Mal. 3:5). Notably, these and similar phrases

sometimes point to a time of redemption: “on that day” (Amos 9:11), “in those days” (Jer. 33:16), and, again, “the days are surely coming” (Jer. 23:7–8; cf. Amos 9:13).

Generally speaking, the Hebrew Bible points to God’s judgment as occurring within history. Only a few passages hint that the righteous might hope for redemption beyond this life or this world (Job 19:25–27; Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1–14). Daniel 12:1–3 promises that many who have died will awake, some to everlasting life, some to everlasting contempt. Isaiah 66:24 contemplates the eternal torment of the wicked.

Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Literature

The notion of both punishment and redemption extending beyond human history or life in this world is developed more fully in some Greek texts from the Second Temple period (Jdt. 16:17; Wis. 3:1–9; 2 Esd. 14:34–35). It is in those writings that the actual term “day of judgment” first appears (Jdt. 16:17; Wis. 3:18; 2 Esd. 7:38, 102, 104, 113; 12:34). The emerging idea is that people will be judged individually in the new age—or perhaps after death—and consigned to their respective destinies. This concept of the “day of judgment” has many affinities with what is found in the New Testament.

New Testament Gospels

According to the first three Gospels, Jesus spoke frequently of the coming judgment. The term “day of judgment” appears in Matthew

10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36. Often, reference is simply to “the judgment” (Matt. 12:41–42; Luke 10:14). Related expressions include “that day” (Luke 21:34–35), “on that day” (Matt. 7:22; Luke 17:31), and “in those days” (Mark 13:17, 19, 24). Sometimes these terms also refer to the expected time of tribulation.

Many of Jesus’s parables (Matt. 18:23–35) and other sayings (Mark 10:17–25) call his hearers to repentance so that they might, at the judgment, be found fit to enter the kingdom of God. The classic passage is Matthew 25:31–46, where the Son of Man or “king” sits in judgment, judging the nations of the world as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

According to Matthew 19:28, the twelve disciples of Jesus are to join in judging Israel. In John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of a future judgment (5:28–29; 12:48), but more often emphasizes his own authority as judge (5:22, 30) and suggests that judgment is already taking place (9:39; 12:31).

Other New Testament Writings

The term “day of judgment” also appears in 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7; and 1 John 4:17. That God will judge the world on a certain future day, often designated as “that day” or the “day of the Lord,” is also stated (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2–4; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:1–8; 2 Pet. 3:10–12; Jude 6). Paul alternatively refers to the coming “day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8), “the day of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 1:14), “the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6), “the

day of Christ” (Phil. 1:10; 2:16), and, on occasion, “the day of wrath” (Rom. 2:5). Revelation 14:7 looks for the “hour” of God’s judgment.

In some of these passages, God is the expected judge; in others, it is Christ. Paul thought that “the saints” (faithful Christians) would also judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2; cf. Matt. 19:28). Only those who lived rightly could hope for a favorable decision at the judgment (Rom. 2:1–8; 2 Cor. 5:6–10; cf. Gal. 5:16–21; see also Rev. 20:12–13). Exactly how Paul’s ideas about the coming judgment are to be reconciled with his doctrine of “justification through faith” (e.g., Gal. 2:15–16; 3:1–14; Rom. 3:21–4:25) is not completely clear (but cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–15).

When?

Many New Testament traditions urge that the time of judgment, along with the coming of the kingdom of God (or the Son of Man), is so near that it may happen at any time (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:1–3; James 5:8–9; 1 Pet. 4:5, 7, 17). Paul had to oppose certain enthusiasts who thought the day of the Lord was already present (2 Thess. 2:1–12; cf. 1 Cor. 4:5). A few New Testament passages hint that judgment takes place directly after death (Luke 16:1–9, 19–31; Heb. 9:27; cf. 2 Esd. 14:34–35).