

# The Day of Judgement

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## Fear of the unknown

Everyone has some experience of a day of judgement – a reckoning or a verdict. We all know the suspense of waiting for the unknown, the feeling of apprehension, the uncertainty, and the fear.

When was the last time that you had to wait for an outcome that you could not predict? Perhaps you have sat an examination and waited for the results to be published, in the knowledge that those results would soon be pinned up on a public notice-board and everyone would know your success or failure. It was failure that you feared and excuses tumbled over excuses in your head as you waited the outcome.

Or perhaps you have taken a driving test, when, after months of practice, it took all your courage as you sat in the car, petrified, waiting for the verdict of the examiner.

Or perhaps you once applied for a job, were short-listed, and when the interview was over were fretting as you awaited the outcome. Getting the job was important to you. Worse is the case of the man who had a feeling of discomfort for some time, and, finally, went to the doctor for a check-up. The doctor was uncertain and unwilling to make a diagnosis without a hospital examination, including X-rays and the opinion of the specialist. Now he has to wait the outcome and is fearful of the unknown.

The same kind of fear and apprehension comes to us as we await the outcome of a moral uncertainty. We know, or think that we have done something wrong and we have "a fearful expectation of judgement".

Think of a boy fearfully waiting for his father to come home from work. It had not been a good day at school and the boy was in a bad mood when he came home. He soon got into an argument with his sister and hit her so hard that her nose began to bleed and she cried for a long time. His mother sent him to his room with the angry words; "You wait there until your father gets home". So the boy can only wait in fear.

The inevitability of judgement has brought uncertainty and fear to all of us at some time in our life. With hindsight we can see that judgement seems to have an inexorable quality like a time-bomb ticking away to a pre-determined end – bringing awful consequences on individuals and communities alike.

### **A day of judgement?**

Herculaneum was a popular resort town on the Italian coast. In the First Century AD wealthy Romans went there to indulge in a hedonistic life-style. They wanted continuous and licentious pleasure. Suddenly, on August 24 in AD79, nearby Mount Vesuvius erupted and rained hot lava, ashes and mud on the town and buried it to a depth of 15 meters – about 2,000 people perished that day. Judgement or natural disaster? Make-up your own mind about that, but the wall paintings and floor mosaics that were preserved in the cataclysm and remain there to this day, give testimony to a life style that would not have pleased Almighty God. We could be excused for thinking that the cataclysm was at God's command.

### **Judgement on Sodom**

Sodom was a prosperous and populated city about 1900 years before Jesus Christ. It was situated close to the Dead Sea on the Israeli-Jordanian border but its precise location is one of those unsolved mysteries that experts have tried to solve. The inhabitants perished in a disaster that may have been of volcanic origin. The city was totally destroyed. We know something about the people who lived there because the story of its destruction is recorded in the Bible. Firstly as a warning that God's judgements are final and have terrible consequences on those who mock Him or live depraved lives and, secondly, as a record of God's loving care for those who love Him and live a righteously. Lot was Abraham's nephew and travelling companion, until their herds increased to such an extent that there was insufficient grazing for both herds and there was a danger of friction between them. They parted, and Lot chose to move to the fertile area near to Sodom.

*"Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD." (Genesis 13:10)*

Time went by and Lot became an important person in the town – a town-councillor – but he was distressed with the sexually deviant life-style of the people whom he was now living and tried to get them to change their ways.

*"Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men. For that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard." (2 Peter 2:7-8)*

The destruction of Sodom was total and all the inhabitants perished and the ruins of the town lie hidden – possibly under the waters of the Dead Sea. We can sense the urgency of the occasion from the biblical record.

*"With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.'" (Genesis 19:15)*

Jesus said: *"The day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all." (Luke 17:29)*

Is this judgement or a natural disaster? The Bible record is quite specific: *"Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD." (Genesis 13:13)*

Therefore God decided to bring judgement on them. Their day of judgement was soon to come; *"The LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me." (Genesis 18:20-21)*

So the town of Sodom has passed into the oblivion of history, but the name has come down to us as a description of sexual perversion at its worst. The event has been recorded so that all generations may know and fear the awesome judgements of the Lord – the day of judgement. The New Testament record is clear:

*"He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly." (2 Peter 2:6)*

*"Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 1:7)*

## **HIV Infection and AIDS**

In a recent BBC film report for 'Panorama', Fergal Keanes investigated the fastest growing AIDS epidemic in the world. Four million people are HIV positive in South Africa and 1,700 more are becoming infected each day.

The main cause is in the sexually promiscuous life-style of many of the people. Sex is no longer regarded as part of a life-long commitment between husband and wife, but as a leisure activity to be indulged in at whim. "Sex is just a game", said one 17-year-old girl when interviewed. However, the awful truth, that starkly faces those people who have contracted the disease, is that there is no escape. They have no future other than the grave. Of course, as with many man-made evils, the victims of AIDS are often totally innocent – wives infected by their unfaithful husbands, babies infected by their mothers, hospital patients infected by tainted blood transfusions. So is AIDS a judgement or a natural disaster? Make-up your own mind about that, but the likeness to God's judgement on Sodom is uncomfortably close.

## **Lot – a survivor of judgement**

This is the hopeful part of the story of Sodom for this man and his family were saved from the cataclysm – saved because he was righteous and was distressed by the sexual perversions of the people among whom he lived. On that day of judgement and amid that awful destruction, God was merciful and saved him alive because of his faith. He was brought out before destruction rained down out of the sky, and so the story of Sodom can be one of hope – for those willing to receive God's mercy.

## **Judgement on the Northern Kingdom**

The descendants of Abraham who lived about 1900 BC were the people of Israel, the Hebrews, and they were a select nation for they had been chosen by God to be His people. They had certain privileges but they also had responsibilities to keep. They had to worship the Lord their God and keep His laws. They failed to maintain their status and were punished by God. In the year 850 BC the nation split into two parts, and in the course of time the northern part was conquered by the Assyrians and deported.

## **Judgement on the Southern Kingdom**

The southern part failed to learn the lesson of history and continued to forsake God. They worshipped idols failed to live faithful lives and social oppression was endemic in their community. The Bible record says it all:

*"The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling-place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy." (2 Chronicles 36:15-16)*

Their final day of judgement was in BC 597, on the 15th March, when the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem, captured the city and destroyed the temple. Nebuchadnezzar, the conquering king of Babylon, deported most of the people to Babylon.

## **Judgement on Jerusalem – AD70**

Much later on, history was to be repeated for the Jewish people who had returned from Babylon again turned away from the true worship of God and again He appealed to them and this time He added to the appeal by sending His Son, Jesus Christ. What happened is well described in the parable.

*"A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. but they seized him, beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all,*

saying, 'They will respect my son.' But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard." (Mark 12:1-8)

Judgement came to the Jewish people in AD 70. Their nemesis came in the form of the Roman armies commanded by Titus, and it was both terrible in its form and strikingly similar to that judgement day in BC 597. The suffering of the people was intense and those who survived were taken captive to Rome. Their humiliation has been on display ever since – in pictures carved on the Arch of Titus erected in Rome in AD81. From AD70 till 1948 the Jews lived in exile, scattered throughout the world.

## **A remnant of faith**

In both of these invasions there are two important features. The first is that both were judgements from God and were the consequence of faithless behaviour by people who should have known better – they were responsible and they were warned. The second is that in both cases there were survivors – a few were saved from destruction by God simply because they were faithful to Him. Those whose trust is in God will always be safe in time of trouble. The discussion thus far has had to do with whole communities but what has been true for these societies is also true for individuals – you and me.

Long ago, in the year AD 58, the Apostle Paul was talking to Felix, the Roman military governor of Judea, about faith in Christ Jesus, righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come. Felix was afraid and said; "*That's enough for now! You may leave.*" (Acts 24:25)

Felix didn't want to hear any more about 'The Day of Judgement' because he was afraid of the consequences.

Some years earlier the same Apostle Paul spoke to the leading academics in Athens and his message ended in a similar way: "*For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed [Jesus Christ]. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*" (Acts 17:30).

Not long before the Apostle Paul was executed on the orders of the Roman Emperor, he wrote a letter of encouragement to Timothy, and in it are the words, "*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge.*" (1Timothy 4:1)

So, the 'Day of Judgement' is an event still to come, and it will involve you and me personally. Whether we like it or not that day will come and we will be there to answer to the Lord Jesus Christ for our actions. There will be no hiding place. This day of judgement has its setting in the kingdom that will be set-up by Jesus Christ when he returns as King of the earth.

Jesus said: "*I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken.*" (Matthew 12:36)

*"I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself, and he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their*

*graves will hear his voice, and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." (John 5:25-29)*

## **What can we do?**

Given that 'The Day of Judgement' is certain, given that it will be sooner than men think, and given also that we will have to face the Lord Jesus and give an account of our lives, what can we do?

This question has been asked before. On one occasion the Apostle Paul was in gaol at Philippi when God sent a violent earthquake that unlocked their chains and opened all of the doors but, curiously, none of the prisoners escaped – they all remained there. The jailer was frightened out of his wits.

*"The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised." (Acts 16:29-33)*

This story has a happy ending, but there are two points that we must not fail to notice:

- We can see that to "believe in the Lord Jesus" is not just an academic matter, it requires action and commitment – baptism.
- It can be seen that the act of baptism is not enough in itself. Paul and Silas first "*spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house*" and only when they had understood and agreed, did they baptise them.

The same is true today. We must know Jesus Christ and his mission, be utterly convinced that he alone can save us from our sins, and be baptised to demonstrate our obedience to his will.

...but there is more. Our way of life from that moment onwards must show our commitment to him. Referring to the coming judgement, the Apostle Peter wrote that:

*"The day of the Lord will come like a thief. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God." (2 Peter 3:10-12)*

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Bible quotations from the New International Version  
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ISBN 81-87409-87-8  
Published and Printed by:  
Printland Publishers  
GPO Box 159  
Hyderabad A.P. 500001  
India