

The Day of the Lord — When?

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Bible Versions

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Various *Days of the Lord* are mentioned in the Old Testament. These were directed:

- Against Gentile nations: Babylon (Isa 13:6, 9); Egypt (Jer 46:10; Eze 30:3); Edom and other nations (Ob 1:15); the surrounding nations (Joel 3:14; Zeph 2:4-11).
- Against the apostates of Israel (Isa 2:12; Am 5:18) and Judah (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; Zeph 1:7, 14; Mal 4:5).

In depicting these Days, the prophets often employ exaggerated language: cosmic or de-creation imagery.

But note this: Such judgments usually took the form of invasion by a foreign army.¹

The New Testament, too, speaks of a Day of the Lord — one final, definitive Day, the day of Christ's return.

See Romans 2:5; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 3:13; 5:5; 2 Corinthians 1:14; Philippians 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; Hebrews 10:25; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7, 10, 12; 1 John 4:17; Revelation 6:17.

This Day is generally assumed to transpire at the end of history.

But as I will explain, this particular Day has already been. It is in our past.

Judgment for us now transpires individually: when we die we immediately appear before God's judgment throne and enter into our eternal reward.

Malachi 4:1-6:

¹ *"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble; the day is coming when I will set them ablaze," says the LORD of Hosts. "Not a root or branch will be left to them."*

⁴ *"Remember the law of My servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances I commanded him for all Israel at Horeb.*

⁵ *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful Day of the LORD.*

⁶ *And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.*"

¹ In Joel 1 and 2, a locust army is the invader.

The Lord's last word to Israel for 400 years ends (in 4:6) with the threat of total annihilation if the nation fails to turn from sin.²

God will separate out the wicked in Israel; like stubble they will be incinerated (4:1).

Elijah will be sent before that great and dreadful Day (4:5).³

This was fulfilled in the person and work of John the Baptist (Lk 1:17; Mt 11:14; 17:10-13).

The Day of the Lord came in AD 70 when Israel was terminated as a nation by the Roman army.

Matthew 3:7-12:

⁷ *But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his place of baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"*

⁸ *Produce fruit, then, in keeping with repentance.*

⁹ *And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.*

¹⁰ *The axe lies ready at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

¹¹ *I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come One more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*

¹² *His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

Here we have John the Baptist's message of judgment:

Messiah will baptize (cleanse) Israel; the wicked will be separated out like chaff and incinerated.

John's message was essentially a continuation of Malachi's (cf. Mal 3:2-5; 4:1).

As noted above, John himself was the "Elijah" promised in Malachi 4:5.

Matthew 24:30, 34 (KJV):

³⁰ *And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*

³⁴ *Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.*

Not just some, but ALL of the events Jesus describes in his Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24 – 25) would transpire in that generation (24:34). This includes his return "in the clouds ... with power and great glory" (24:30).

And it includes the Sheep and Goats Judgment related in Matthew 25:31-46.

The fact of the matter is this:

In this Discourse Jesus ties his return in judgment to the 70 AD Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

See Matthew 24:1-3, 15-21; Luke 21:20-24.

² For continued disobedience, God will strike the land of Israel "with a curse" (Mal 4:6). The single Hebrew word underlying this phrase (*hērem*, Strong's H2764) refers to entities or persons that are wholly devoted to God, being set apart either for sacred use or for complete destruction. Accordingly, God is here threatening Israel with the same fate as Edom: total destruction (cf. Mal 1:3-4).

³ Turning the hearts of fathers and children to each other (in Malachi 4:6; cf. Luke 1:17) means this: Parents will diligently teach their children God's law, and the children will in turn obey those commandments and honor their parents.

Matthew 25:31-34, 40 (KJV):

³¹ *When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:*

³² *And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:*

³³ *And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.*

³⁴ *Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:*

⁴⁰ *And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

When he returns as King, Jesus will judge the nations gathered before him.

He will separate the wicked from the righteous (25:31-33).

The basis of judgment will be how people treated his harassed and persecuted disciples (25:40; cf. 10:40-42).

That the Sheep and Goats judgment was to transpire in that generation is confirmed by the following verses from Matthew 16.

Matthew 16:27-28 (KJV):

²⁷ *For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.*

²⁸ *Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.*

Jesus here unambiguously promises to return as King within the lifetimes of some of those who heard him.

In his kingly role, he will also judge and reward each person according to his deeds.

The judgment that Jesus speaks of here — to take place within that generation — is none other than that of the Sheep and Goats (related in Matthew 25:31-46).

Luke 21:20-22, 32:

²⁰ *But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that her desolation is near.*

²¹ *Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country stay out of the city.*

²² *For these are the days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written.*

³² *Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened.*

The Jewish War, especially its culmination in the 70 AD siege and destruction of Jerusalem, represented God's judgment on the first-century Jews.

Verse 22 declares that this judgment represented the definitive fulfillment of all Old Testament vengeance prophecies. Such prophecies were directed against the enemies of God's people — Babylon and Edom.⁴

In judging those nations God was avenging the shed blood of his servants.

The irony here is that the Jews, through their murder of Jesus and persecution of his followers, had themselves become the enemies of God.

⁴ See Isaiah 34:8; 61:2; 63:4; Jeremiah 50:15, 28; 51:6, 11, 24, 56.

The War constituted for the Jews the Great Tribulation— a time of great suffering the scale of which would never be repeated (Mt 24:21).

A question naturally arises:

How do we know Jesus here isn't speaking about some latter days' war still in our future?

Answer: This is patently evident from Luke 21 itself: When YOU see these things happening ... (Lk 21:31).

That generation would be the one to witness ALL these events (Lk 21:32).

Indeed, they and their contemporaries would (in some sense) "see" the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, etc. (Lk 21:30).

Acts 2:17-20, 40 (my translation):

¹⁷ *"And it will be in the last days, says God, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams.*

¹⁸ *Yes, even upon my servants and my maidservants I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*

¹⁹ *And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood and fire and billows of smoke.*

²⁰ *The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."*

⁴⁰ *With many other words he earnestly testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."*

Peter is here citing Joel's prophecy concerning the Spirit's outpouring and the judgment to follow.

"The great and glorious day of the Lord" (2:20) refers to the events of 66-70 AD.

The Jewish War culminated in the fiery end of Jerusalem and its temple.

Peter here exhorts his hearers to be saved from the wrath that would befall that "perverse generation".

Terms such as "perverse" or "crooked generation" derive from the Song of Moses (Dt 32:5, 20), where Moses anticipates Israel's future apostasy and the outpouring of God's covenant wrath upon the nation.

Jesus described his contemporaries in similar terms — see Matthew 12:39; 16:4; 17:17; Mark 8:38.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-5:

¹ *Now about the times and seasons, brothers, we do not need to write to you.*

² *For you are fully aware that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*

³ *While people are saying, "Peace and security," destruction will come upon them suddenly, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.*

⁴ *But you, brothers, are not in the darkness so that this day should overtake you like a thief.*

⁵ *For you are all sons of the light and sons of the day; ...*

Eschatology constitutes a sizeable chunk of the two epistles that Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church.

See 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13 – 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2:1-12.

That church was founded by Paul following his preaching in the local synagogue, as related in Acts 17:1-9.⁵

⁵ Paul founded the Thessalonian church ca. AD 50, and his two letters were likely written from Corinth a year or two later.

During Paul's brief stint in Thessalonica — a few weeks at most — he proclaimed Jesus to be the promised Messiah (Ac 17:3). Further instruction centered around persecution and eschatology (1Thes 3:4; 2Thes 2:5). The reason for his focus on eschatology, in both his initial preaching and his two letters, can be put down to one thing: Jesus' return, and all the events tied to it, would impact the Thessalonians directly. Here the focus is on Jesus' return as a thief. But the Thessalonians themselves would not be taken by surprise. In fact, they would obtain relief from persecution when Jesus returns in judgment (2Thes 1:5-10).

Hebrews 10:25, 30-31, 37-39:

²⁵ *Let us not neglect meeting together, ... but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

³⁰ *For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge His people."*

³¹ *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

³⁷ *For, "In just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.*

³⁸ *But My righteous one will live by faith; and if he shrinks back, I will take no pleasure in him."*

³⁹ *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*

Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in danger of abandoning Christianity for the safety and comfort of institutional Judaism, probably in the early 60s AD.

To prevent such action the author explains how the New Covenant had supplanted the Old Covenant's provisional and typical entities.

The Old Covenant had been rendered obsolete, and its city, temple, priesthood, sacrifices and ceremonies were all about to end (8:13).

The epistle's readers could "see the Day drawing near" (10:25) — the Day of judgment on Jerusalem.

The author cites two verses from the Song of Moses: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay", and "The Lord will judge his people" (10:30, citing Deuteronomy 32:35-36).

God was about to judge Israel — those in the nation who rejected his Son and who clung to the temple ritual. Jesus was coming very soon (10:37).

The author trusts that his readers are amongst those who are saved rather than those who will perish (10:39).

James 5:7-9:

⁷ *Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer awaits the precious fruit of the soil — how patient he is for the fall and spring rains.*

⁸ *You, too, be patient and strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near.*

⁹ *Do not complain about one another, brothers, so that you will not be judged.*

Look, the Judge is standing at the door!

James here addresses Christian laborers who were being defrauded by wealthy Jewish landowners.

He urges them to be patient in view of the Lord's imminent return to judge their oppressors.

And not to grumble in their hardships, lest they be judged as well.

James had directly addressed these landowners in 5:1-6:

They had “hoarded treasure in the last days” and “fattened [their] hearts in the day of slaughter” (Jas 5:3, 5).

James is referring to Israel’s last days as a nation and to the looming war with Rome in which these landowners would lose everything — their lives as well as their property.⁶

1 Peter 4:5, 7, 17-18:

⁵ *But they will have to give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*

⁷ *The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and sober, so that you can pray.*

¹⁷ *For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God?*

¹⁸ *And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”*

According to Peter, the “revelation” of Jesus was imminent (1Pet 1:7, 13; 4:13; 5:1, 4).

Here he notes that the end of all things is imminent and THE Judgment is about to begin.⁷

As part of that judgment, his readers were already undergoing a “fiery trial” to prove the genuineness of their faith (cf. 1Pet 1:7).

Not just here, but in Revelation as well, judgment begins with the churches (chaps. 2 – 3) before extending to those outside (chaps. 6ff.).

2 Peter 3:10-13:

¹⁰ *But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and its works will be laid bare.*

¹¹ *Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to conduct yourselves in holiness and godliness ¹² as you anticipate and hasten the coming of the day of God, when the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements will melt in the heat.*

¹³ *But in keeping with God’s promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.*

Peter had just linked the certainty of Jesus’ return with his glory seen in his Transfiguration (2Pet 1:16-18).

Here he anticipates the coming “day of judgment” (2Pet 3:7) — the “Day of the Lord”, or “day of God”, when the world and its “elements” will be destroyed by fire (3:10, 12).

Writing probably in the 60s AD, he is warning about “last days” Jewish scoffers who will soon arise (2Pet 3:3).

These scoffers will recall Jesus’ promise to return in judgment upon their nation, alleging its non-fulfillment since 30+ years had already elapsed (2Pet 3:4).

To his readers Peter points to the Flood to show that God has intervened in the past and he will do so again:

Judgment, though delayed, will certainly transpire.

⁶ That these were Jewish landowners is evident from the fact that they employed laborers to work their fields. Outside Jewish circles such work was performed by (unremunerated) slaves.

⁷ 1 Peter 4:17 (Greek text): τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment.

The following translations include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NEB, NOG, YLT.

Compare this with Hebrews 9:27, where the article is absent in the Greek, yet many of our more familiar English versions choose to include it. Translation biases!

Peter's first readers were themselves awaiting the Day and could even hasten its arrival (3:12). There's good reason to apply Peter's description to the burning of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. In fact, many learned theologians, from the 17th century on, have done just that. For a defense of this position, see the following two articles on this website:
1) *2 Peter 3: A Preterist Interpretation.* 2) *The Elements of 2 Peter 3.*

Revelation 6:16-17:

¹⁶ *And they said to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.*

¹⁷ *For the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to withstand it?"*

The book of Revelation is "bookended" by imminence statements: 1:1, 3 and 22:6, 10. That is to say, its visions depict events that were to transpire in the 1st century. For the most part these show God's judgment on the living — judgments on first-century Israel and Jerusalem, and upon the nations of the Roman Empire. The judgment of the dead, which also transpired at that time, is shown in Revelation 20:11-15 (cf. 11:18). The judgments of Revelation 6 relate to the Jewish War. 6:16 shows the utter despair of the Jews, probably during the last days of the siege of Jerusalem. For only then would they realize that their hoped-for divine rescue was not to be, and that instead they were under judgment for having killed the very Son of God. The Old Testament source for 6:16 is Hosea 10:8. Jesus in Luke 23:28-30 cites from Hosea 10:8 as he warns the women of Jerusalem of the coming horrors of the War. This passage from Revelation thus fulfills Jesus' warning.

Revelation 22:6-7, 10-12, 20:

⁶ *Then the angel said to me, "These words are faithful and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants what must soon take place."*

⁷ *"Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one ..."*

¹⁰ *Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of prophecy in this book, because the time is near."*

¹¹ *Let the unrighteous continue to be unrighteous, and the vile continue to be vile; let the righteous continue to practice righteousness, and the holy continue to be holy."*

¹² *"Behold, I am coming soon, and My reward is with Me, to give to each one according to what he has done.*

²⁰ *... "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*

The judgments depicted in Revelation were imminent (22:6). Jesus himself was personally present as he came against the Jews and other nations in judgment (22:7). Unlike Daniel whose visions concerned the distant future, John is not to seal up the words of the prophecy because the time of fulfillment is imminent (22:10; cf. Dan 8:26; 12:4, 9). So close was the Judgment that to all intents it was too late for people to repent and change (22:11). In the Judgment, people would be rewarded according to their deeds (22:12; cf. Mt 16:27; Rom 2:5-11). Jesus affirms three times that he is coming "soon" (22:7, 12, 20).

Conclusion

The definitive Day of the Lord — the Day of Judgment — transpired in the 1st century AD.

Hebrews 10:25 informs us that the Day should be understood in terms of the Jewish War with Rome (66-70 AD), and especially its conclusion — the siege and fall of Jerusalem.

Many of the visions of Revelation also relate to the Jewish War.

Some of Revelation is concerned with judgment on the nations as well. See 11:18; 16:10-11; 19:19-21.

Also at that time, all who had previously died were individually judged before the throne of God in heaven.

See Revelation 11:18; 20:11-15; 1 Peter 4:5.

The enormous numbers of people who lost their lives at that time — not just in the Jewish War but also in the calamities that befell the Empire — were similarly judged before God's heavenly throne.

Judgment for us now takes place individually. When we die we immediately appear before God's judgment throne and enter into our final reward — heaven or the lake of fire.

See Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 20:15; 21:7-8.

We need to keep in mind that Jesus, as King, is continuously assessing and judging individuals and nations.

He presently rules the nations with a "rod of iron" (Ps 2:9; Rev 12:5; 19:15), which implies the existence of ongoing rebellion and the periodic need for discipline and punishment.

But God's kingdom has come. A new world order has arrived. We are under Christ's beneficent rule.

We are in the new heavens and earth, which is characterized by ever-increasing righteousness.

See 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21 – 22; Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-10; 42:1-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6.