



## JUDGMENT DAY

Isaiah 9:8-10:15

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*Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

Newcomers to the Christian calendar may be a bit confused by the Advent season. It's really about two important arrivals, one of them in the past, and one in the future. The first arrival happened with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago. That's what we celebrate at the very end of Advent, on December 25. The second arrival is yet to happen, and it will be the return of Christ as king and judge over all the world. We believe, in the words of the Nicene Creed, that Jesus will "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Traditionally, Advent is a time for introspection and confession in anticipation of Jesus' second coming—especially Judgment Day.

Judgment Day is an important theme in the New Testament. St. Paul wrote, "[We] must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ... (2 Corinthians 5:10). Every one of us will stand before King Jesus on Judgment Day. In Revelation 20, St. John envisioned that day with Jesus on a great white throne judging all the peoples of the world.

Of all the beliefs of traditional Christianity, few are more startling or disturbing to modern ears. Yet for Christians around the world down through the ages, belief in Judgment Day has been a source of comfort rather than terror. As Christians, we look forward to Judgment Day for two reasons. 1) On Judgment Day, God's justice will prevail and evil will be utterly destroyed. 2) On Judgment Day, God's mercy will flow to believers of every tribe and tongue, people and nation—all who put their hope in the risen Christ.

Judgment Day wasn't invented by Jesus and the Apostles. In a way, it was something that had already happened to God's people centuries before Christ. The Old Testament prophets often foretold the coming Day of the Lord, when God's almost infinite patience would finally run out, and he would intervene to punish injustice and oppression.

Isaiah warned of a day when—unless they repented—God would intervene in the northern kingdom of Israel. Sadly, they did not listen to the word of God. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled a few years later in 722 BC, when Assyria obliterated the capitol city of Samaria and all the northern kingdom.

Isaiah's warning (Isa 9:8-10:4) came in four stanzas, each ending with the same solemn warning of God's judgment (9:12, 17, 21; 10:4): "For all this [God's] anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still."

## STANZA 1. THE NECESSITY OF JUDGMENT DAY (ISA 9:8-12)

The kingdom of Israel was founded on God's Word. Their constitution was the Torah—the first 5 books of the Old Testament. But what happens when God's people no longer listen to his word? In the Torah, God promised that if his people turned away from him, then he would intervene and punish them.

In Isa 9:8-12, Isaiah described the *foolish self-confidence* of Israel. They were absolutely determined to live independently of God. In fact, after God called out to them in vain through the prophets (v 8), and then tried to get their attention by way of some preliminary strikes causing destruction to the city, they simply planned to rebuild bigger and better:

[They said] in pride and in arrogance of heart:  
“The bricks have fallen,  
but we will build with dressed stones;  
the sycamores have been cut down,  
but we will put cedars in their place. (Isaiah 9:9-10 ESV)

From cheap bricks to fancy stonework, and from common sycamores to exotic cedars, they would rebuild their Tower of Babel even stronger than before. They were absurdly confident of their ability to thrive apart from God. How was God to respond to this?

When I was growing up, our family sometimes would travel to visit another family a few hours away. The parents in that family never disciplined their kids. Of course they would threaten punishment again and again, but they never would follow through. Even as toddlers their kids were out of control, and it only got worse as they grew up, knowing they could get away with murder. Over time, our visits shortened from weekends, to an overnight, to a day-trip, to only an hour or two. It was too much. Too crazy. Too dangerous.

God was patient with Israel. Very patient. But it had been more than 200 years since civil war had divided the nation. The people had suffered so much. The surrounding nations remained in total darkness, without the light of the Gospel. God had sent prophet after prophet to call his people back to him and to their mission. But they would not listen. As a result, Israel was so out of control that Judgment Day had become necessary.

Yes, it's unsettling to imagine God coming in judgment. We all want a God who will be nice to us. But we also want a God who will keep his promises, rather than a God who never follows through. God had promised to intervene if his people refused to listen to his word. Time was running out. Judgment Day was coming soon.

## STANZA 2. THE ALTERNATIVE TO JUDGMENT DAY (ISA 9:13-17)

Why did God even warn the Israelites of his impending judgment? Why didn't he simply wipe the Israelites off the face of the earth? Because of his great *mercy*. The Bible emphasizes that

**God loves to be merciful.** He prefers mercy over punishment. And for centuries, through generation after generation of apostasy in Israel, God mercifully waited and wooed them.

What was God waiting for? Relationship. He longed for his people to return to him, so that their relationship might be restored. This is what the Bible calls repentance, a pivot in direction, from running away from God, to running back to him. **Repentance is the alternative to Judgment Day.**

Sometimes we hear about repentance and we say, "That's not for me. That's for the really wicked people." But here in the second stanza, Isaiah emphasized the comprehensiveness of Judgment Day for all those who would not repent. He foresaw that the entire nation would refuse God's mercy and suffer judgment instead:

The people did not turn to him who struck them,  
nor inquire of the Lord of hosts. (Isaiah 9:13 ESV)

It would affect (v 15) the nation's elders and honored men and lying prophets. It also would affect (v 17) the young men, orphans and widows. In other words, Judgment Day would come to everyone, young and old.

Remember that God's preference is to be merciful. When Jonah carried a message of hope to the pagan city of Ninevah, they repented and the Lord spared their city. Even in the case of Sodom, the notorious pagan "sin city" of ancient Canaan, God rescued Lot and his family out of it. Yet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, home to ten of the tribes of the people of God, Isaiah feared that not even one person would return to the Lord.

Repentance is the alternative to Judgment Day. Unless they repented, everyone would be punished because everyone had turned away from God.

### **STANZA 3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF JUDGMENT DAY. (ISA 9:18-21)**

All it takes to receive God's mercy is to repent and return to him. It's the easiest thing in the world to do—and also the hardest. It's so easy to return to the loving arms of the Father. It's so hard to relinquish our own independence.

In vv 18-21 Isaiah offers further motivation to return to God, with two terrifying images of the destruction that Judgment Day would bring. First, God's judgment would be like a raging wildfire burning through the land (vv 18-19), except that the wicked would be the kindling. Everyone and everything would be consumed by the fire. And second, as people turned against one another it would be like cannibalism in a famine (vv 20-21). Brother would devour brother, and still they wouldn't have enough to eat.

These are very frightening images, but Isaiah wasn't sneering. He was urging and exhorting. Why be foolish and stubborn? Why not repent and return to the Lord?

## STANZA 4. THE CHOICE OF JUDGMENT DAY (ISA 10:1-4)

Finally, in 10:1-4, Isaiah calls the question, especially of those leaders in Israel who promoted the apostasy and profited from the reign of wickedness in Israel. They would not be too rich or too important on Judgment Day. Unless they repented, they too would suffer. So Isaiah asked them:

What will you do on the day of punishment,  
in the ruin that will come from afar?  
To whom will you flee for help,  
and where will you leave your wealth?  
Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners  
or fall among the slain. (Isaiah 10:3-4 ESV)

They too would suffer God's wrath because they would not repent and return to him. The only sensible choice was repentance. Yet they remained foolishly self-confident, preferring autonomy over repentance.

## JUDGMENT DAY ON ISRAEL... AND ASSYRIA (10:5-15)

Judgment Day came to the northern kingdom of Israel in 722. Assyria (10:5) became God's rod for punishing Israel. In a pathetic, climactic irony, Israel became the "godless nation" (10:6) against whom God sent pagan Assyria to spoil and plunder. Strengthened by the Lord, Assyria devoured every city and nation in its path. The emperor of Assyria boasts in vv 9-11 about all the cities that he will conquer as his empire expands infinitely, without end.

But let's not think for a moment that God had somehow given up on his plan to redeem the world and draw all nations to himself. He may have used pagan Assyria to punish Israel, but he would not allow pagan Assyria to remain in power for long. The Assyrian emperor refused to believe that God was giving him victory. In so doing, he displayed the same foolish self-confidence that the Israelites had exhibited.

Some years ago archaeologists discovered a massive set of 7th C BC stone panels that decorated the Assyrian emperor's palace. They were carved to describe the Assyrian invasion of Lachish, a city in the southern kingdom of Judah, some 20y after the fall of Samaria. Now on display at the British Museum, these amazing panels provide a glimpse of what the Assyrian invasion must have been like. They depict the whole battle, from the Assyrian siege works to the deportation of Jewish refugees. Only one panel has any writing. It shows the Assyrian emperor enthroned at the city gate, announcing that Judgment Day had come. It reads, "Sennacherib, the mighty king, king of the country of Assyria, sitting on the throne of judgment, before the city of Lachish. I give permission for its slaughter."

Foolish self-confidence. Not very long afterwards, God defeated Sennacherib at Jerusalem, and he returned home to his palace, only to be assassinated by his son. The kingdom of Assyria would soon fall into the hands of Babylon, and the cycle of foolish self-confidence would be repeated

with Nebuchadnezzar, and many others, all the way down to Caesar, and Herod, and Pontius Pilate.

God's judgment is certain. It came to all these kings and empires, because none of them would repent and return to the Lord.

## **TURN TO JESUS THIS ADVENT**

God loves us so much that he warns us of judgment and also offers us mercy. Because he loves us, he tells us again and again in his Word that Judgment Day is coming. On that day every person will stand before the King and have to give an account before him. But if we will first swear our allegiance to the King, then he will pardon us on that day.

Like Israel of old, how we respond to God's word is up to us. If we repent and return to the Lord, we can look forward to the Judgment Day with confidence and hope.

Or, like the Israelites, we can persist in foolish self-confidence. We can stick our fingers in our ears and refuse to listen to God's word. If we drown out God's word, we'll find another god who's a lot easier to follow. The big, inflatable, doe-eyed god who judges no one and takes everyone up to heaven when they die, no matter what. The god who is always nice and never a meanie. The god who lets us do whatever we want. The more we follow that god, the more chaos and terror will follow us.

Have you been refusing the Lord's correction? Listen to God's message of judgment and mercy. Jesus loves us a lot more than the inflatable god of this world. Jesus will not abandon our world to evil. He will intervene to make all things new. Violence, oppression and injustice will not have the last word. He will judge the world and set it to rights once and for all. We don't celebrate the sad consequences of sin, but we do give thanks for the comfort that justice is coming and it will prevail.

Jesus is the God who is worth watching and waiting for this Advent. He died for us, so that he might show us mercy on Judgment Day. He's a God whose help we truly need because we're not self-sufficient. He takes no pleasure in rendering judgment against us; he's not in the demolition business, but in the renewal business. He loves to rescue and restore and make all things new. Repent and return to him, and receive his mercy on Judgment Day.