

The Concept of Future Judgment

The concept of future judgment was not as well known in the Old Testament era, as it is today. Much more revelation has been given to us by Jesus Christ and the apostles.

Yet even during the Old Testament era, people knew that there was value in serving God, even in this present life! And though much of their understanding about what happens "after life" was vague and uncertain, they knew instinctively that there was "something." Scripture tells us that even *without* revelation from God, people know instinctively, in their consciences, that certain types of conduct deserve judgment and condemnation (Romans 1:32; 2:14-15).

Here is a partial description of the development of the concept of judgment and the "after life" in Scripture:

1. Adam knew about the promise of a future judgment against the force of evil that empowered the serpent. He also knew that there would be two types of "seed" or "offspring" (Genesis 3:15). Convinced that this was true, Adam's response was to name his wife "Eve" (3:20), which means "Living" - referring not merely to "biological life" (a different word), but to the *living* "seed" of verse 15 (which would come from her). What else Adam may have known about a future judgment is not revealed.
2. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he identified himself as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). He could not say this if they had ceased to exist! According to Jesus, they were still alive in some manner - and this fact implied a future resurrection! (Matthew 22:32, etc.)
3. Even in this present life, it was well known that following God had its advantages. The very actions of the wicked would normally bring judgment to them! This is the theme of many of the "sayings of the wise" (Proverbs), as well as many of the Psalms. This is the message of some of Job's friends - who misapplied the truth to Job, because they forgot this next point:
4. In an imperfect world, injustice *does* occur; justice doesn't *always* fall upon the wicked when we think it should. This was pointed out by Job - who also realized that the very nature of God implies that injustice must somehow be "made right." And so he anticipated a future time when he would be vindicated, even if it was after his body had been destroyed by his afflictions (Job 19:25-27). The books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes also make reference to injustice and how we should respond to it.
5. When things go bad for the righteous, they are *still* "in God's hands" (Ecclesiastes 9:1). This statement does not give us specific details about the "after life"; but it is an

expression of trust and reliance on the God who will take care of such matters. In Psalm 73, Asaph, who had almost given up hope, was encouraged when he realized that, even under the *worst* conditions, the righteous would ultimately be better off than the wicked. God will be with the righteous forever; but the wicked will be destroyed (Psalm 73:23-26; compared to 73:18-20).

6. The Old Testament word that refers to where people go when they die ("Sheol") can often be translated accurately as the "grave." Yet in some passages, something *beyond* the grave seems implied. (Note also that there are other Hebrew words that can be used, if we want to refer *only* to the dead body or the place where bodies are put.) In the New Testament, the corresponding word ("Hades"), is used with a greater emphasis on judgment and on things that happen *after* death.
7. In Ecclesiastes, we find a few passages that anticipate a final justice. One example is at the end of chapter 12; another is in 3:17. Also the Teacher realizes that, at death, the human spirit does not return to the *dust*, but to the God who gave it (12:7).
8. The prophet Daniel was told about a future day, in which many of the dead will "awake" to eternal life. Others will "awake" to eternal contempt - they will be objects of contempt and abhorrence. In other words, there *is* a future resurrection - pleasant for some, but not for others.
9. Jesus greatly expands our awareness of what happens after physical death. The apostles give us further details. Ultimately, we have the book of Revelation, which describes the final judgment, the New Jerusalem, and the final destiny of the righteous and the wicked.

Down through history, people have had varying degrees of understanding about what will happen after death. But that does *not* mean that people today have an advantage over those of the past. Ultimately, we don't follow God because of our understanding (or ignorance) about events that will occur after death. We follow God because he is worthy of being followed. We follow God because he is God and we are his creatures. This is all the reason we need. And he has opened our eyes to see it, and changed our hearts to accept it.