

The Day of the Lord

by John F. Walvoord

The Day of the Lord is a time of judgment and wrath for those who reject Christ, but believers are not appointed to wrath and will be taken out of the world before this time begins.

Scripture: Isaiah 13:9, Zephaniah 1:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:2-11, Revelation 6:12, Revelation 6:16

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "End Times"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, exploring the profound subject of the Day of the Lord. This passage unveils the impending events that will unfold globally, emphasizing the distinction between the day of grace and the Day of the Lord, a period of divine judgment upon the wicked. The Day of the Lord, depicted in the Old Testament, signifies a time of wrath and judgment, followed by a period of deliverance and blessing for Israel during the millennium. Walvoord highlights the relationship between the coming of Christ for His church and the Day of the Lord, underscoring the unexpected nature of this day and the assurance that Christians are not appointed to wrath but to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Transcript

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

First Thessalonians 5:1-11 deals with the subject of the Day of the Lord. The Bible indicates that tremendous events are ahead for the world. Gathered under the expression "the day of the Lord" is a large group of prophetic events predicted in both the Old and the New Testaments. The subject of the translation of the church revealed in Chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, however, is never mentioned in the Old Testament. There is no reference in the Old Testament to saints being raptured, taken from earth to heaven without dying. There are many references to Christ coming back to the earth and of resurrection from the dead, but no rapture, no translation in the Old Testament, except by way of illustration in the cases of Elijah and Enoch.

What Is the Day of the Lord?

In considering the Day of the Lord, we at once are plunged into a tremendous Old Testament doctrine, a doctrine that covers many pages in the Old Testament. Before examining the Scriptural revelation, it is necessary to determine precisely what this expression, "the day of the Lord" means. We say that the present age is the day of grace. We do not mean that there was no grace shown by God in the previous dispensations. Obviously, many of God's dealings with man from the Garden of Eden down to the present

day have manifested the grace of God. But God in this present age has especially singled out the doctrine of grace for display, revealing grace as a basis for salvation and for our Christian life. Grace speaks of God's unmerited favor to us through Christ who loved us and who died for us. The Scriptures picture that after this day of grace has come to its close, which may be simultaneous with the translation of the church, the Day of the Lord will begin.

The Day of the Lord is a period of time in which God will deal with wicked men directly and dramatically in fearful judgment. Today a man may be a blasphemer of God, an atheist, can denounce God and teach bad doctrine. Seemingly God does nothing about it. But the day designated in Scripture as "the day of the Lord" is coming when God will punish human sin, and He will deal in wrath and in judgment with a Christ-rejecting world. One thing we are sure of, that God in His own way will bring every soul into judgment.

The word day is used in the Bible in various ways. Sometimes it is used to refer to daylight; for instance, the hours between dawn and sunset. Sometimes it is used to refer to a twenty-four hour day. The Jewish day began at sunset and continued to the next day at sunset. That also is referred to as a day. Sometimes the word day is used in the Bible as a period of time, just as we use it in English. We speak of the day of our youth; what do we mean by that? We do not mean that we were young only one day, but we mean the extended period of time in which we were young. In 1 Thessalonians 5 the Day of the Lord is used in the sense of an extended period of time, but having the characteristics of a twenty-four hour day. That is, it is a day which begins at midnight or in the darkness, advancing to dawn and then daylight. It will close again with another period of darkness after daylight has passed. That apparently is the symbolism involved in the Day of the Lord. A few sample passages, out of literally dozens of them in the Old Testament, will give the general content of this period.

The Day of the Lord in the Old Testament

The prophecy of Isaiah 13:9-11 speaks for itself: "Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible." In other words, there will be a great and dramatic judgment, manifest in the physical world, which will interfere with the light of the sun, moon, and stars. God will put down the proud and deal with the sinners. It is a time of judgment.

The same thought is found in Zephaniah 1:14-16: "The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the trumpet and alarm against the fenced cities, and against the high towers." This passage continues in the same strain. The Day of the Lord, according to the Old Testament, is a time of God's judgment and a time of God's dealing with the world in its sin.

The Day of the Lord is also a time of deliverance and blessing for Israel. The millennium--the whole kingdom reign of Christ on earth--in which Christ personally directs the government of the world, is also included in the Day of the Lord. In Zephaniah 3:14-15, by way of illustration, there is a picture of Israel's blessing in that day, obviously following the time of judgment: "Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel;

be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy; the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more." The passage here sets forth the praise and joy and rejoicing of Israel in the millennium. The Day of the Lord, as revealed in the Old Testament, indicates first a time of wrath and judgment upon a wicked and Christ-rejecting world which is followed by a time of peace in which Christ shall be in the midst of the earth and will rule over the earth and bring blessing to the nation Israel. The millennium will end with another night of judgment (Rev. 20:9-15).

The Day of Wrath

The truth concerning the coming of Christ for His church is revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4. The question which is answered in 1 Thessalonians 5 is "What relationship has the coming of Christ to the Day of the Lord?" In verse 1, accordingly, Paul writes: "But of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you." The word time here is a translation of the Greek word from which we get our word chronology. Of the time--the general chronology, and of the seasons--the particular time--he states he has no need to write unto them. In other words, they had already been instructed, first, concerning the general time when Christ would come and, second, concerning the particular time. In a word, it is this: the general time can be known, but the particular time cannot. That is the point of his message.

In verses 2 and 3 he says: "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." The Day of the Lord is described as a day of wrath, which is a very important point. Compare this passage with the sixth chapter of Revelation which is about the time of the beginning of the great tribulation. This portion of Scripture is also similar to what Isaiah and Zephaniah said about the day of judgment in the Day of the Lord. Is not this the same period?

Revelation 6:12-14 states: "And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places." This is exactly the same thought and is also a warning of judgment upon men.

In Revelation 6:16-17 we learn that the wicked cry out and say "to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" Isaiah said it was a day of wrath; Zephaniah said it was a day of wrath; Revelation 6 says it is a day of wrath. In other words, the picture we have here of the great tribulation--the time of trouble on the earth--is identical to the picture of the Old Testament revelation of the beginning of the Day of the Lord.

Relation to Coming of the Lord

The question is: "How does the coming of Christ for His church relate itself to the Day of the Lord which precedes the second coming of Christ by a number of years?" This Day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly. What is the point? The point is that just as the translation of the church is the end of the day of grace it also marks the beginning of the Day of the Lord. In other words, the one event seems to do two things: it serves as the closing of one day and the beginning of the other. If that is true, it gives us some very positive and definite teaching along the line that the church will be taken out of the world before the day of trial and trouble overtakes the world. Paul is telling the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord is

going to come, and this follows immediately the passage which dealt with the coming of Christ for His church. In 1 Thessalonians 5 it is revealed that the Day of the Lord comes suddenly and unexpectedly. It is described: "the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night." A thief in the night comes unheralded. There are no signs that pertain to a thief.

Unexpected by the World

The judgment will come when the world is expecting peace and safety--just the opposite of the time of trouble which is predicted. At the time of the beginning of the Day of the Lord there will be some evidence for peace. Apparently the world situation at the beginning of the Day of the Lord will provide a false basis for peace. This may be accomplished by a strengthened "United Nations" or world organization. This state of peace is quite in contrast, however, to the revealed situation at the second coming. Then the armies of the world will be drawn in battle array at Armageddon. The world will be engaged in a gigantic military struggle then. But at the beginning of the Day of the Lord they will be saying "Peace and safety." In that very time sudden destruction comes. In the Greek New Testament the word sudden is emphasized. That event will not be preceded by signs, that is, there will be no warning. There will be no possibility of escape. The illustration given is that of travail coming suddenly upon a woman with child. It will be God's divine, unescapable judgment upon those who are "in darkness." The beginning of the Day of the Lord is clearly not the second coming of Christ. It is rather begun much before this and may begin at once when the day of grace closes with the translation of the church.

Day of the Lord Does Not Overtake Christians

How are Christians related to this judgment? Verse 4 states: "But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief." Christians, of course, do not know when the Day of the Lord is coming either. As far as expectation is concerned, they are in the dark about it. Christ could come today and the Day of the Lord would follow, but no one can set the day. It is unexpected in this sense for us. What does He mean then by the statement, "ye ...are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief"?

The best explanation is that we will not be here. When the Day of the Lord comes, we will be in glory. "Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness." In other words, we belong to a different dispensation, to a different day. We belong to the day of grace. Why should a child of God's grace--who is saved by grace, who is kept by grace, who has all the wonderful promises of God--be forced to go through a period which according to Scripture is expressly designed as a time of judgment upon a Christ-rejecting world? We belong to the day; they belong to the night. The passage continues: "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness."

Application of the Truth

In verse 5 the doctrinal section is brought to its close. Verses 1-5 have revealed that the Day of the Lord will come suddenly as a destruction upon the wicked, but we as Christians will have no part in it because we do not belong to that period of time. In verses 6-11 Paul makes the application. All true prophetic teaching has an application. The study of prophecy is not just for prophecy's sake. God has taught us concerning future things because He wants us to be informed and, being informed, to be better Christians. One of the reasons for presenting the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ is that it is an impelling motive to be living for Him every day. There is no better reason for working for Christ, apart from real love

for Him, than the motive that we may see Him today. It makes a tremendous difference whether Christ is coming now or whether our prospect is that we will go through the tribulation and our only hope of seeing Him without dying would be to go through that awful time of trouble. The imminency of the Lord's return is a precious truth.

On the basis of this hope an exhortation is given, based upon the imminency of the Lord's return: "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober." The word sober in the original means exactly what is meant by it in English. It is the word for not being intoxicated. We are so prone to be intoxicated, not necessarily by liquor but by the stimulants of the world -- its glamour, pleasures, and appearance. Paul's message to these Thessalonian Christians reveals also that we should be watching for the coming of the Lord. If we realize the solemnity of the event for us and for those who will be left behind, how earnestly it should make us watch and be sober! How we should be diligent in our Christian life and profession because of the imminent coming of Christ!

Faith, Hope, Love

Paul goes on to plead his case: "They that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night." That is the world's life. "But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation." In Chapter 1 mention was made of these same three things--faith, love, and hope. In 1:3 Paul reminds the Thessalonians of their labor of love, and their work of faith, and patience of hope. In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, the same triad is found-- faith, hope, and love. On the basis of our being "of the day," we are to go on in the faith for the Lord. We are to put on the breastplate of faith and love, the best possible protection for spiritual battles. In addition, we should put on 'for an helmet, the hope of salvation."

Not Appointed to Wrath

In verse 9 it is stated: "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ." In this passage he is expressly saying that our appointment is to be caught up to be with Christ; the appointment of the world is for the Day of the Lord, the day of wrath. One cannot keep both of these appointments. Certainly, there will be some after the church is gone who will turn to Christ, and in Revelation 7 it is stated that there will be an innumerable company of martyrs. Many will be saved after the church has gone to heaven, but they will experience the awfulness of that period. As the wrath of God is poured upon the earth, it will involve them too.

When an atom bomb explodes over a city in the tribulation, it will kill believers as well as those who are not. They will participate in the awful trials and troubles of that day, and the reason they will be subjected to these things is that they were not ready for Christ when He came for His church. They had not trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ at that time. But you and I who have trusted Him, who have believed in Christ as our personal Savior, are not appointed to that day of wrath. We are appointed unto the day of grace to meet Christ in the air and to be forever with the Lord. This passage of Scripture teaches that Christ is coming for His church before the Day of the Lord begins, before the day of trouble pictured in Revelation and all through the Bible overtakes the world. We are not appointed to wrath, but to salvation.

Appointed to Salvation

The passage explains the basis for this. In that day, in connection with our faith in Christ, we will have obtained "salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should

live together with him. Wherefore, comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do." In other words, whether we "wake," that is, are living in the world at the time the Lord comes, or whether we "sleep" and our bodies have been laid in the grave, though our spirits have gone to heaven, when Christ comes back for His church there will be a wonderful reunion-- both a translation of the living saints and a resurrection from the dead. It is all based on the hope of the death of Christ. Some think that only very spiritual Christians are going to be raptured, including of course those who hold this theory. Most of us would like to meet some of these specially spiritual folks. We may know many very fine Christians, but have we ever found one yet who was perfect? No, not yet. If our being translated depended upon our perfection, all of us would be required to go through the tribulation. If, on the other hand, our being raptured depends on the death and the resurrection of Christ as this picture indicates, then every true believer in Christ who has trusted in Him as his sacrifice for sin and as his God and his Savior will be translated when Christ comes and will go home to glory with the Lord and with the loved ones who have gone on before.

The Exhortation

On the basis of this wonderful prospect, we should "comfort" one another and encourage one another in the faith, "even as also ye do." As we look forward to the coming of the Lord, may it not only be a part of our theology and of our hope, but may it be the mainspring of our Christian life and testimony. If today is the last day on earth before Christ comes, may it be a day that is well spent in God's service for His glory and for the testimony of the truth!

Questions

1. What is the meaning of the expression "the day of the Lord"?
2. To what extent is the Day of the Lord a day of wrath?
3. How does the Day of the Lord relate to the rapture?
4. Why does the Day of the Lord overtake the world as a surprise but does not overtake Christians as a surprise?
5. What exhortations does Paul give on the basis of the truth of the coming of the Day of the Lord?
6. Relate the words faith, love, and hope in Chapter 5 with Chapter 1.
7. How do you explain that Christians are not appointed to wrath and how does this relate to the question of whether Christians will be on earth during the Day of the Lord?
8. How does Paul relate to our comfort the fact that Christians will not enter the Day of the Lord?

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