

The Day of the Lord

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Introduction.

- A. One of the most interesting, albeit sad, things about the religious world around us is the way in which in which so many take the gospel of Christ and co-opt it to match their own interests and desires. Some of the things that churches do nowadays are just plain silly. They host everything from NASCAR clubs to square-dancing lessons. Other churches devote themselves to political action.
- B. Another, more subtle, expression of this entanglement is the fascination that many of our friends have with the events surrounding the end of the world. This too is quite understandable. There are many things happening in the world that make it a scary place to live in. There's war in Iraq, war in Lebanon, and a dozen other conflicts raging around the globe. People want to believe that there's some purpose to all of the butchery, so they try desperately to link it to the coming of God's final judgment on the world. They take apocalyptic passages from Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation, and other sources, and they force-fit current events into those passages. That way, the political chaos that surrounds us starts to make sense, and they can believe that it will all resolve into the return of Jesus to earth. Of course, this has been happening for a thousand years. Things don't work out the way these would-be Scriptural interpreters predict, but that doesn't stop them.
- C. Sadly, this effort to bring order from chaos requires a great deal of distortion of Scripture to succeed. The purpose of the law of Christ is not to predict and give meaning to the political events of every age. Instead, it is designed to tell Christians in every age what they need to do to please Him. We too need to be concerned with the end of the world, but our focus should be not what it means for world politics, but what it means for us personally. Indeed, this is the focus of 1 Thessalonians 5:1-9. Let's consider this passage, then, to learn what we should understand and what we should do about the coming day of the Lord.

I. Timing.

- A. The first thing we need to understand about the day of the Lord is its timing, a topic covered in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2. Before we can delve into this, though, we first need to understand what a "day of the Lord" is. Biblically speaking, there is not just one "day of the Lord." Instead, a day of the Lord occurs whenever God vindicates the righteous and executes His judgment on the ungodly. In the Old Testament, there are numerous occasions that are all described as "the day of the Lord." Let's look at just a few:
 1. Jeremiah 46:9-10 describes the day of the Lord with respect to Egypt. Jeremiah is announcing that Egypt has earned God's enmity and is about to get clobbered. This happened throughout the first half of 6th century BC, when Egypt lost battle after battle with Babylon, until finally being conquered by Persia.
 2. In similar fashion, Obadiah prophesies in Obadiah 9, 15 about the day of the Lord that is going to overtake Edom. This refers to a different event than does the Jeremiah prophecy. Edom was destroyed about 500 BC, and its conquerors were not the Persians, but the Nabateans. That's when the Edomites were judged.
 3. 100 years after the destruction of Edom, we see yet another prophecy about the day of the Lord, in Malachi 4:5-6. This is not a prophecy about events in the Old Testament at all. Instead, it refers to the coming of John the Baptist in the time of Christ, and the day of the Lord with which John is most closely associated is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It's yet another time of judgment.
- B. The point is that there are many days of the Lord described in Scripture, not just one, so it's sloppy Biblical scholarship to take all the passages that refer to the day of the Lord and assume that they all apply to the same event. They do not. This is the problem that many run into. They read about the signs associated with the day of the Lord described in the first half of Matthew 24 and start scanning their newspapers, looking for events that match up with the signs. The problem is that the first half of Matthew 24 is about the destruction of Jerusalem, an event that took place nearly two thousand years ago. That is where they get tangled up.
- C. By contrast, let's look at the way 1 Thessalonians 5:1-2 describes the signs associated with its day of the Lord. We know what this passage is referring to from its context. Just a few verses earlier in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul describes the resurrection of the dead that will take place on this occasion, which nails this day of the Lord down for us. Paul's subject is the Final Judgment, the time when Jesus will descend from heaven and call His people to live with Him forever. Paul says of this day of the Lord that he isn't going to write to the Thessalonians about the signs accompanying it, and this for a very good reason: there aren't going to be any signs. Instead, the Last Judgment is going to sneak up on us like a thief in the night. Its coming is secret.
- D. Now, this one passage blows just about every theory of premillennialism out of the water, but it makes complete sense that Jesus would return in this sudden fashion. Let me ask you: when you were in school, and you had a teacher that liked to give pop quizzes, did that teacher announce the timing of his pop quizzes? Of course not! Instead, at the beginning of the school year, he probably said something like, "I'm going to be

giving pop quizzes throughout the year, so I want you to always be prepared to take one." If the teacher started announcing his pop quizzes, he would only defeat his intention of keeping his students studying.

- E. In the same way, God doesn't tell us when He's coming back or when He's going to judge us. If God had done the opposite, if God had given us a means of predicting the date and time, I guarantee you, the day before the day of judgment, we'd have a line of people in here a mile long getting baptized to get their fire-insurance policy. God doesn't want that. He doesn't want us to do the minimum, so to make sure that we live in a godly way all the time, He keeps the day of His return a secret. We don't know it, and we won't until it happens.

II. Effect on the Wicked.

- A. However, although the day of the Lord is going to come very stealthily, it will have a terrible effect on the wicked. 1 Thessalonians 5:3 explains. This passage tells us what is going to happen to those who didn't heed God's warning. God is going to come when they least expect it, and they are going to be destroyed.
- B. Now, American pop culture doesn't like to believe this about God and the day of judgment. People around us prefer to think that when God shows up, He's just going to act like a big teddy bear. Sure, there are going to be a few wicked people who get punished, but God is going to gather up everybody else because they're basically good and take them to heaven with Him. Interestingly enough, just about everybody puts themselves in this class of basically good people. It doesn't matter who they are; just about everybody thinks they're good enough to go to heaven. If you go talk to some of the murderers down in Stateville, even they will tell you that they are basically good people. They're all busy saying, "peace and safety!"
- C. However, the Bible tells a different story. This passage divides people into two groups: people who spend their lives preparing for the day of the Lord, and those who do not, and the unprepared will not escape. All these people who are spiritually adrift, but believe that someday, they'll be able to drift right into heaven, will learn just how wrong they were. Its effects in their lives will be immediate and catastrophic.

III. Effects on the Righteous.

- A. This message of doom contrasts quite sharply with Paul's description of the day of the Lord's effects on the righteous in 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5. He tells us that we as Christians are of the day, not of the night.
- B. This is an important metaphor, so let's spend some time looking at it. In real life, why do thieves do almost all of their thieving at night? It's not because the night sky coordinates so well with their ski masks; it's because people aren't prepared at night. The thief can slip in the window and rob the homeowner blind at night because the homeowner is busy snoring away in the bedroom. What happens, though, if the thief tries to come in the day? Well, now the homeowner is awake and moving around, and as soon as the thief comes in, he's going to get spotted. The homeowner's going to scream and yell, the homeowner's going to call 911, and, if this is in Texas, where they think the Second Amendment is part of the Ten Commandments, the homeowner's going to fill the thief full of lead. The thief, not the homeowner, will be the victim.
- C. The difference that Paul is getting at, then, is a difference of preparedness. Because the homeowner was awake and ready during the day, even though he wasn't specifically expecting the thief, he was able to handle what could have been a terrible situation in a way that protected him from loss. When we as Christians live like children of the day, the same thing is true of us. We aren't ever specifically expecting the day of the Lord to come, but when it does come, we can deal with it because we're prepared.

IV. Our Decision.

- A. Paul's emphasis on preparedness points us to a decision that we have to make. Based on what we know about the day of the Lord, how are we going to live? The last segment of this context, 1 Thessalonians 5:6-9, tells us what we must do. To begin with, we have to live prepared lives. Instead of sleeping and getting drunk, we must watch and be sober. This is not literal, but it tells us two important things about our lives.
 - 1. First, we have to live with a vigilant attitude. This means that we have to keep the things of God constantly on our minds. We have to remember that our earthly lives are just a limited-time offer, so that we must be prepared to face each moment as though it were our last.
 - 2. Second, we can't let ourselves be distracted from serving God by the pleasures of the world. That's what Paul means by "drunk," not just literally drunk, but spiritually knocked out by some outside force. Any sin that we allow ourselves to become ensnared in can make us drunk to the coming of the Lord.
- B. In addition, Paul also describes the spiritual protection worn by children of the day. Just as a Texan today who expects a thief might carry his shotgun around with him, so too a citizen of the ancient world might don his armor so that it could protect him from the thieves. Paul here mentions two pieces in particular: the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Spiritually speaking, these things defend us from harm. When we lead lives that are faithful and loving, we ensure that the day of the Lord cannot harm us, and when we keep the hope of our salvation foremost in our minds, it helps to deflect any attack that Satan might offer.

Conclusion. If you want to be part of those appointed to salvation on that day and not wrath, now's your chance.