

## STUDIES IN BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY No. 4

### “The Day of the Lord”

We are speaking these Sunday evenings about the various “motifs” or central themes in which the Bible’s vision of the future is presented, both its inaugurated and its yet unconsummated eschatology. We have so far considered “the seed” and “the land” as such motifs and we have seen how they draw together the teaching of the entire Bible, from beginning to end. Each of those two themes is introduced very early, each is developed in stages, and each is given partial fulfillment along the way of salvation history and yet awaits a final fulfillment at the end of time. In its own way each binds together, therefore, every period and every epoch of the history of salvation. Believers, no matter when they lived, are longing and looking for the same thing and have the same hope. And, in each case, there is both clarity and some uncertainty. We know, by and large, what to expect, but only in general. The specifics are left largely unexplained. What is more, the idiom of biblical prophecy being what it is, many things are placed together in the Bible’s vision of the future that, in fact, are revealed by the unfolding of history to be a sequence of events rather than a single event, and sometimes even a sequence of events separated by large periods of time. This we have called the *prophetic perspective* or *prophetic foreshortening*. We will find these things true as well with the third of these biblical eschatological motifs, the one we take up this evening, namely, “the day of the Lord.”

The “Day of the Lord” has sometimes been called “the very heart of prophetic eschatology.” [Cited in von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, ii, 119] There seems to be joined to this future day, this coming day, “a relatively well-defined complex of...expectations.” And whenever we have the prophecy of this coming day there is the expectation of the Lord, of Yahweh, coming in person. [*Ibid*] There are not that many instances of this precise terminology in the Old Testament, sixteen to be precise. There are, however many related prophecies that use similar terminology, though not precisely the “Day of the Lord”. But, taking them together, there are certain things we can say about the Day of the Lord.

1. First, it is a day, a specific time, when the Lord intervenes in human affairs. This is the burden of the term “day of the Lord.” And there are parallels that emphasize the same personal appearance and personal activity on the Lord’s part. “We have the “day of [the Lord’s] vengeance” in Isa. 34:8; we have the day “of the Lord’s burning anger” in Isa. 13:13; and then many phrases in which the Lord speaks of this coming day in the first person: “the day I punish Israel for her sins” (Amos 3:14), “the day when I take from them their stronghold” (Ezek. 24:25); “the day that I cleanse you” (Ezek. 33:33), “the day I visit them” (Jer. 27:22), “the day that I make up my treasured possession” (Mal. 3:17), and “the day I will stand up to testify” (Zeph. 3:8). The emphasis falls over and over again on the Lord’s personal coming to intervene and to bring things to some conclusion in the world. It is the Lord’s personal intervention that makes this coming day so cataclysmic and so definitive in its outcome.
2. Second, the day of the Lord is a day of judgment. If you remember, this caused some misunderstanding in Israel. The Israelites assumed that the Day of the Lord would bring judgment and punishment upon Israel’s enemies but bring deliverance, blessing, and prosperity to Israel herself. The prophets had to disabuse them of this false confidence and

did so by telling them that the Day of the Lord would be judgment for them also. Amos 5:18-19 is a case in point:

“Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.”

Judgment and the punishment of sin is a constant feature of the Day of the Lord prophecies. A typical text is Obadiah 15-16, where the punishment of Edom is prophesied.

“The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head. Just as you drank on my holy hill, so all the nations will drink continually; they will drink and drink and be as if they had never been.”

Synonyms include “day of doom” (Ezek. 7:7), “day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar” (Isa. 10:3), “day of vengeance” (Isa. 63:4), and so on. The language and imagery of warfare predominate in the Day of the Lord texts. For example in the text in Obadiah, we read of Edom’s coming judgment in these terms:

“ ‘In that day,’ declares the Lord, will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, men of understanding in the mountains of Esau? Your warriors, O Teman, will be terrified, and everyone in Esau’s mountains will be cut down in the slaughter.”

So, the Day of the Lord is the occasion, the event when the Lord will actively intervene, will visit the earth, to punish sin that has come to a climax.

3. Third, the Day of the Lord brings deliverance and salvation for God’s true and faithful people. In the Obadiah passage we have cited twice so far, after hearing of what the Day of the Lord will mean for sinful and unbelieving Edom, we read this:

“But on Mount Zion will be deliverance; it will be holy, and the house of Jacob will possess its inheritance. The house of Jacob will be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame; the house of Esau will be stubble, and they will set it on fire and consume it. There will be no survivors from the house of Esau,” the Lord has spoken.

The famous “Day of the Lord” passage in Joel 2 and 3, from which Peter quotes in his Pentecost sermon, promises a pouring out of the Spirit, and then we read,

“In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land.

“Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow – so great is their wickedness! Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. *But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.*”

By the way, many of the Day of the Lord prophecies include this expectation of supernatural signs in the heavens. Joel, earlier in the passage I just cited, had written: “I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” [2:30-31] You have something very similar in Isa. 13:9-10:

“See, the day of the Lord is coming – a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger – to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.”

That is important to note, as we will see, because the NT relates the same cosmic signs mentioned in such passages to the Second Coming of Christ.

Everywhere we find this double expectation: punishment for the wicked *but deliverance for the faithful people of God*.

4. Fourth, in the Day of the Lord prophecies we find, in a very typical way, the near and the far Days of the Lord seen together in a single vision of the future. Once again we find the *prophetic perspective* or *prophetic foreshortening*, as we found it in the motifs of the seed and the land, now in the motif of the Day of the Lord.

A classic instance of this is found in the judgment prophesied for Babylon in Isaiah 13. Here Isaiah speaks of a Day of the Lord on the not-too-distant horizon, a day when Babylon will be destroyed.

“An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah...saw...Wail for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this all hands will go limp, every man’s heart will melt. Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. See I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold. Their bows will strike down their young men; they will have no mercy on infants nor will they look with compassion on children. Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in Through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will

Rest his flocks there. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.”

What you couldn't tell, however, as I read that to you, is that I read only selected portions from the entire oracle, from the beginning, from the middle, and from the end. In the same oracle, mixed together with that vision of a day of destruction and judgment for Babylon, we find this:

“See, the day of the Lord is coming, a cruel day... The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless. I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty, in the day of his burning anger.”

It seems that Isaiah has seen the destruction of Babylon, the empire of his own day, that fell to the Medes and the Persians, together with a final, ultimate judgment of mankind in a single vision of the Day of the Lord, as if these were one divine visitation, one day of God's judgment. The near and the far are mixed together. The prophecy of the one becomes a prophecy of the other.

You get this same phenomenon elsewhere. Amos sees beyond the immediately impending judgment of Israel, a Day of the Lord, a final Day of the Lord, a day of universal judgment and beyond that a day of salvation when the house of David will be restored and the earth and Israel again be made objects of God's blessing. Zephaniah describes the Day of the Lord as a historical disaster at the hands of some unnamed foe, but he also describes it in terms of a worldwide catastrophe in which all creatures are swept off the face of the earth so that nothing remains. Out of that universal conflagration will emerge a redeemed remnant. Beyond the judgment of the nations and the world will be salvation for Israel and the Gentiles. [Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 66-67]

In other words, the prophets saw the temporal days of the Lord, his days of judgment in their own lifetimes or shortly thereafter, as precursors of one, final *dies irae*, the day of the divine wrath. That makes perfect sense, of course, all the more from what we have seen so far of the idiom of biblical prophecy. The prophets believed that the Lord's final uprising against his foes would take the same form as it had done in days of old. The former, more local and nation-specific Days of the Lord – those that punished Egypt or Edom or Israel – established a pattern for the later, once for all, Day of the Lord. In the latter case, the Lord's intervention has become greatly intensified. The Lord will take all the nations of the world to task, nature itself would be affected; the event has expanded into a phenomenon of cosmic proportions. [von Rad, ii, 124] So, the lesser divine interventions in judgment and deliverance have become the precursors and the pattern of the ultimate and cosmic Day of the Lord.

5. In the fifth place, the language of the Day of the Lord is carried over into the New Testament and is used there exclusively of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

We find the term in a variety of forms: *the day of the Lord* (1 Thess. 5:2), *the Day of the Lord Jesus* (2 Cor. 5:5), *the day of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Cor. 1:8); *the Day of Jesus Christ* (Phil. 1:6); *the day of Christ* (Phil. 2:16), and *that day* (2 Thess. 1:10). Dispensational interpreters tried for a long time to distinguish between the Day of the Lord and the Day of Christ (one being the rapture, the other the Second Coming), and to find in them two different eschatological programs, one for the church and one for Israel, but, that effort was doomed from the start. All these phrases refer to the same day, and to the same event: not a single calendar day, necessarily, but the time of Christ's final and decisive visitation of this world in judgment and salvation. [G.E. Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 554-555] In a discussion of Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead, Paul goes on in 1 Thess. 5:1-3 to write.

“Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come upon them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.”

And, in 2 Thess. 1 we read:

“God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on *that day he comes* to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

This is the ultimate, cosmic day of the Lord that we find in the OT prophets mixed together with their expectation of more contemporary visitations and interventions of the Lord. We know this from the facts that 1) this day will bring what the prophets forecast – final judgment to the wicked and deliverance and vindication to those who have been faithful to the Lord; 2) it is described in the same way, with signs in the heavens and with the same responses on the part of men – weeping, mourning, terror, outcries for the wicked and joy and relief for the righteous, etc.; 3) its nature is the same, as a bringing of violence against the enemies of God – the imagery of battle is as common in the NT and in Revelation as it is in the OT prophets; and 4) by the emphasis that falls on its being the personal intervention of the Lord and, therefore, inescapable, inevitable, and irresistible.

Once again I want you to notice the pattern we have already observed in the Bible's teaching about the future. First, *early developments presage later ones*, early fulfillments establish the pattern for the final and ultimate fulfillment. The “days of the Lord” that have occurred already in history, in both the judgment and the deliverance of God's people and the punishment and destruction of the wicked are foretastes of the great and terrible Day of the Lord which will bring history to its end. Second, there is this characteristic mixture of language, of idiom, and of imagery. One of the problems we have in fixing the interpretation of some of the *Day of the*

*Lord* texts is the flexibility that biblical authors employ in making use of this language and imagery. The same imagery is used in describing historical judgments as is used to describe the ultimate judgment. Once again, various schools of biblical interpretation argue whether such a text refers to a judgment now in the past or still to come. We will find this particularly true of the texts in the NT that some take to be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and others regard as a prophecy of the second coming and the end of the age. But the same is true of some OT texts that can be taken as references to historical judgments now past or to the great day of the Lord at the end of history. I don't mean to imply that there isn't a large measure of agreement, for there is, of course. But, if I were to tell you that for a hundred and fifty years some interpreters, who were clearly evangelicals, have argued that the second coming *has already occurred* you will realize that the language of the day of the Lord is not without its complications. That is an absurd interpretation, of course, but it illustrates how susceptible the Bible's language has been to misinterpretation at precisely this point. The same language being used for events in history now past and for the second coming, there can easily be confusion between the two.

But, we can be very positive about certain things concerning the Day of the Lord.

One consequence of the language employed, of course, is the emphasis placed on the terrible character of the second coming, a point often emphasized in the New Testament. Tolkien called it the *eucatastrophe*, the good catastrophe, because while awful for the unbelieving world, it would be wonderful for the saints. While it brought destruction and doom, it also brought deliverance and eternal peace and joy. We are sometimes put off by the brutal accounts of destruction and violent judgment to which the prophets treat us at some length. Babies being dashed against rocks, women being raped, old men and children cut down as with a scythe, cities leveled, battlefields strewn with the dead, countries literally depopulated and left barren. Nothing remaining at all but the silence of death. But, remember, these very forecasts of judgment against Babylon or Egypt or Edom or Israel are mixed together with the account of the great day at the end of the world. We are being taught something about what that day will be like for the unbeliever. Jesus, Paul, and Revelation take over that same language and use it to describe the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Such language, such description, is designed, of course, to produce an emotional impact upon us!

And what makes this language so potent and powerful and meaningful is that it is confirmed in life time and again as it was confirmed in the life of the ancient epoch, the time of the prophets. How often we have actually seen the very pictures of divine judgment that the prophets painted for us in their writings. Particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century! Listen to this description of the aftermath of one of the great encirclement battles of *Barbarossa*, the German invasion of Russia in 1941. One German officer wrote,

“We suddenly saw a broad, earth-brown crocodile slowly shuffling down the road towards us. From it came a subdued hum, like that from a beehive. Prisoners of war, Russians, six deep.... We made haste out of the way of the foul cloud which surrounded them, then what we saw transfixed us where we stood and we forgot our nausea. Were these really human beings, these grey-brown figures, these shadows lurching towards us, stumbling and staggering, moving shapes at their last gasp, creatures which only some

last flicker of will to live enabled to obey the order to march? All the misery of the world seemed to be concentrated there.” [Cited in Keegan, *The Second World War*, 196]

And add to that picture the scenes of the death camps, of long columns of refugees trying to carry something of their former lives with them as they fled the advancing conquerors, the mass graves unearthed that spoke so powerfully of the pitiless murder of thousands upon thousands of people. How many times, in how many parts of the world, did we see such scenes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Who are we to take lightly the language used in the Bible to describe the Day of the Lord? Who are we to minimize the severity of the Lord’s judgments, we who not only have the record of them in Holy Scripture, but have seen them with our own eyes. The brutalities of life in this world teach us to take seriously and not to flinch in the face of the prospect of God’s holy wrath being unleashed against the wicked. No one lives an authentic Christian life who does not realize what is coming and does not shudder and does not, therefore love Christ all the more for his having delivered us from this.

Another great emphasis of this way of speaking about the future is that of *the personal role of the Lord himself*. History will not end because of some environmental disaster, such as Rachel Carson predicted in her bestseller, *The Silent Spring*. Nor will it end in some kind of doomsday mistake with nuclear weapons, as in Stanley Kubrick’s movie *Dr. Strangelove*. It will end because of the sudden and largely unexpected appearance in the world of the Lord Jesus Christ, and his bringing with him the judgment of the nations and the deliverance of all those who trusted in him.

It is interesting that Paul uses three other terms for the second coming besides “the Day of the Lord” and each of those terms emphasizes this same personal character of the last day. The first is *parousia* which can mean presence or arrival but in either case refers to the personal appearance of the Lord Jesus. The second is *apokalypsis*, unveiling or revelation and in this use refers to the disclosure to the world of Christ’s power and glory. The third is *epiphaneia* or appearing and, again, lays stress on the visibility of Christ’s return. We are not looking for something to happen; we are looking for someone to arrive! And that someone is Jesus Christ. It is *his* coming, *his* appearance that Paul calls the Christian’s “blessed hope.” We look, the world looks, always for him! The Day of the Lord!