

“The Day of the Lord”
Amos 5:18-27
June 18, 2006

Text Comment

- v.18 This is the earliest recorded use of the expression “day of the Lord”. It will occur many more times in the prophets of the OT and again in the New Testament, but clearly it is already by this time a well-known technical term or religious figure of speech.
- v.20 In other words, the Israelites were thinking that the *day of the Lord* would bring happiness and triumph to them when, in fact, it will bring disaster. Israel had this rosy view of her relationship with the Lord, a mistake for which she would soon pay dearly.
- v.23 The Lord won’t accept Israel’s sacrifices. Amos has already said that. But here he says that he won’t accept her praise either. There was always music – played and sung – in Israel’s worship, but it brought no pleasure to God as it should have.
- v.24 Amos has already made the same point in several different ways: Israel’s worship is an offense to Yahweh. It failed at three levels. 1) It was not being offered exclusively to Yahweh. Israel’s worship by this time was syncretistic and other gods were being worshipped at Israelite shrines, as we will read in v. 26. 2) It was not faithful to the liturgical regulations laid down in the Law of Moses. And, supremely, 3) it was not offered with integrity. It was the worship of hypocrites. They professed their loyalty to the Lord when at the shrine, but in their lives they dishonored him by living in open disregard of his commandments. They left their worship to treat others unjustly, to oppress the poor for the sake of financial gain; to bribe judges to secure favorable rulings at court, and so on. Israel was in precisely the same position as that of a married man who wants his protestations of loyalty to his wife to be taken seriously even though he is committing adultery several times a week. [Stuart, 355]

This was, as you know, the Canaanite theory – the theory of all idolatrous worship. One can be personally immoral and unethical and yet remain right with the gods if only he enthusiastically supports their worship. The gods care about their worship, not about your personal holiness. That is the theory of all forms of idolatry. The god is false so your life can be also. This is the utterly unique thing about the worship of Yahweh. This is what separated the Law of Moses from all the other religious teaching of the ancient world. The Lord required godliness – faith and obedience – before he required worship and worship without godliness was a positive offense to him.

- v.25 This verse can be taken in two different ways. It could be taken, as the NIV does, as a rhetorical question. The assumed answer is “No.” That is, the sacrificial system inaugurated in the wilderness at Sinai was pre-designed for a time when Israel would be settled in the Promised Land and have access to the normal means of food production and the raising of livestock. In the time of manna there could not have been the regular sacrifices of animals and grain envisaged in the Mosaic ritual. Amos’ point would then

be that sacrifice is not the *sine qua non* that Israel thinks it is. There were no sacrifices in the wilderness and Israel was not less God's people for that. There is something more important than sacrificial rituals, viz. a heart of faith and love producing an obedient life. Or it can be taken not as a question but as a statement, even what our Jack Collins calls an "impassioned affirmation." You brought me sacrifices and offerings for 40 years in the desert. Amos' point, in that case, would be that all of those sacrifices did not prevent God from judging the wilderness generation of his people and leaving them dead in the wilderness because of their unbelief and disobedience. Israel seemed to think that so long as they offered Yahweh sacrifices all would be well. Amos is reminding them that their own history is the disproof of that idea.

v.26 We have here an example of that stinging sarcasm the prophets often employ when talking about idols. You carry them around in your processions – some astral deities or star gods appear to be in view – and it never dawns on you that you are worshipping something that you made yourselves. You think yourselves so sophisticated and yet how dumb does someone have to be to bow down in worship to a block of wood he shaped with his own hands?

v.27 Assyria lay to the north and east of Israel, past Damascus.

The Old Testament prophets are a harder part of the Bible for Christians to read. Modern Christians can find them opaque, hard to understand. But we have before us in these verses a very typical passage and one that, I think you will see, you have seen, is not at all hard to understand. In fact, we have represented here a very common theme of the ancient prophets and if we grasp Amos here, we will have gone a long way toward understanding all the OT prophets. Get this, in other words, and you have gotten a great deal. And what is Amos saying? Just this. Outward religious observance – such observance as could be found everywhere in Israel – even such observances as are commanded by God in his Law, are valuable, useful, and pleasing to God *only to the extent that they are the sincere expression of a faithful heart and only insofar as they produce as their fruit an obedient, holy, and righteous life of service to God.* [Driver, 190.] God is not impressed with religious activities *per se*, even if they conform outwardly to biblical instruction, still less if they do not. God wants the heart, the faith, the love, and the obedience of a man or woman.

The burden of Amos' preaching is to convince Israel that their assumption about their relationship with Yahweh is a monumental mistake. He reminds them again and again that in the covenant Yahweh made with Israel he promised his people that if they proved unfaithful to him he would reject their worship and devastate their land. Well Israel had proved unfaithful and they now must face the Lord's wrath. But, try as he might, Amos couldn't make Israel believe this. She was, as he will say in 6:1, "complacent." She had confused assurance with complacency. [Motyer, 129] She thought better of herself and her behavior than Amos did and resented his accusations of wrong-doing. Her worship had inoculated her against the fear of the Lord.

They were content with their profession of faith and unconcerned by the fact that their lives lacked the evidence to make that profession credible. Their confidence was groundless, but they

refused to believe it. No doubt there were believers among the population of the northern kingdom – Amos spoke of the remnant in the previous paragraph – and perhaps their presence, as the conscience of the nation, made it even easier for the rest of the Israelites to believe that their relationship with Yahweh was secure. That has often been the case. Take all the Christians out of the United States of America today and see how profoundly and how rapidly the rest of the culture would descend into darkness. The presence of the godly acts as a brake on the progress of evil. Every indicator of moral and spiritual decay would spike if you removed from the population a large number of people who never got drunk, never did drugs, never committed crimes, did not consume pornography, who remained faithful to their marriages and families, were industrious at work, compassionate toward the poor, and committed in their relationships to the welfare of others. What a difference it would make if you removed from our land the people who live to please God, not themselves or other people. It would be much harder for Americans to believe that God was happy with them if there were no Christians in the land.

I don't say that Christians don't sin and don't fail from time to time. Most assuredly they do. But in terms of public virtue, in terms of a society's conception of itself, people's perception of their culture's morality and the justice and righteousness of its ways would be profoundly and irreparably diminished were the faithful Christian church to be removed from it. Christians impart an appearance of righteousness to our public life that could not be replaced in their absence. And that does not yet account for the substantial measure of public righteousness that exists in our land as the momentum – the almost exhausted momentum – of its Christian past. Ethically, our culture has been feeding on the dead carcass of a spent Christianity. *Well, so it was in Israel in Amos' day.*

So, for any number of reasons, the people of that time, prosperous as they were, refused to believe that God was angry with them. It is not something human beings find easy to believe in any case, and, without disaster, men almost never believe it. But Amos did his best to convince them of that unwelcome truth that they found so preposterous. And among his techniques was this reference to the Day of Lord. It was the kind of phrase that he could use to jar his hearers. They expected it to mean one thing; he argued it meant something very different.

The phrase probably had its origin in the idea that a true king could defeat his enemies in a single day. [Stuart, 353] Certainly Yahweh, being the king of kings, could defeat all his and his people's enemies in a single day. So the *day of the Lord* came to refer to a time when the Lord would intervene in some dramatic way on his people's behalf to demolish his enemies. And the idea came to be a very important feature of biblical prophecy.

People were familiar with the phrase. They thought they knew what it meant. 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.” 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 himself 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 that I cleanse you" (Ezek. 33:33), "the day I visit them" (Jer. 27:22), and so on. 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. Judgment and the punishment of sin is a constant feature of the Day of the Lord prophecies.

Synonyms for the phrase "day of the Lord" 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.

3. Third, the Day of the Lord brings deliverance and salvation for God's true and faithful people. Take the famous "Day of the Lord" passage in Joel 2 and 3, from which Peter quotes in his Pentecost sermon that promises a pouring out of the Spirit:

"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. 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.*" Everywhere in the day of the Lord texts 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 way very typical of biblical prophecy, the near and the far distant brought together in a single vision of the future. Here too we find the *prophetic perspective* or *prophetic foreshortening*, as we have often found it in biblical prophecy. For example, later in this same prophecy Amos will look beyond the immediately impending judgment of Israel that he has been predicting – her destruction at the hand of Assyria in 721 B.C., a destruction he refers to here as the day of the Lord – and see another day of the Lord, a final day of the Lord, a day of universal judgment and a day of the consummation 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 for Judah at the hands of Babylon, 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 total 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. 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. 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. All of that explains why 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).

This is the ultimate, final, 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.

It is this biblical pattern of temporal days of the Lord presaging and anticipating the ultimate, cosmic day of the Lord, that justifies our thinking of the tsunami or Katrina or the devastations of war such as the world has witnessed over the last century as foretastes of the second coming. They are *days* of the Lord that presage *the day* of the Lord. For the enemies of God, the second coming of Christ will be like that, only worse and carrying with it a terrible finality.

Now with that understanding of the phrase in our minds we can appreciate Amos' turning of the tables on his contemporaries. They thought of the day of the Lord as Yahweh's visitation of judgment upon Israel's enemies. "No!" said Amos. "You are Yahweh's enemies; the day of the Lord will consume YOU!" The day of the Lord will bring disaster upon you, not triumph; ruin not deliverance! And how often we are warned of this same reality in the New Testament and, especially, in the teaching of the Lord Jesus. He is always setting before us people who have come to take for granted their peace with God only to find that the coming of the Lord proves to be for them a day of doom. "Depart from me, I never knew you." "Sir! Sir!" they said, 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'" Just two texts about the day of the Lord; one from the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, one from the end. And there are many other such texts in the New Testament. Israel's fatal complacency is hardly a spiritual condition unique to the 8th century B.C!

The sudden and catastrophic reversal of fortune is a commonplace of biblical teaching as it is a commonplace of human life. Illustrations are endless. Think of the rich man who just enjoyed a fine meal in one of the Titanic's luxurious dining rooms, then was completing his altogether pleasant evening playing cards with friends, smoking an expensive cigar and drinking some finely aged port – utterly unaware that his life was ticking down to its terrifying conclusion in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. Jesus told a parable, you remember, making precisely that point, about a rich man who left his comfortable life only to find himself in hell.

Amos's message then is precisely the same as that of a minister today who stands up in a great many so-called Christian churches and warns them that when Christ comes again they will find that he considers them his enemies not his friends. And in such churches, so used to their way of thinking and of their disinterest in so much of what God's Word says and requires, that message would fall on the same deaf ears and would create the same amused offense as it did when Amos preached it. But, then, Israel, rich and prosperous Israel, disobedient Israel, did not exist a few years later, having been wiped off the face of the map on the day of the Lord.

My task as your minister, my first and last responsibility, is continually to force upon your consciousness the connection between time and eternity. My challenge is constantly to help you, even force you to reckon with *day of the Lord* and to carry the reality of that future day back into your daily present. It is not an easy thing to do. It is not easy for me to forge that connection between time and eternity in your thinking and living – or in my own – and it is not easy for you to preserve it in your mind and heart. You know, if only you will think about it, how little in any given day you reckon with the end of time and the judgment day of God. You must admit, if only you will, how often you live, day after day, as if there were no such day of the Lord on the horizon, growing nearer by the day. We can *see* today, but we must *believe* the day of the Lord! That is no doubt why there have been and are so many days of the Lord in human history: without them we would forget altogether the day of the Lord and, forgetting that, we would lose touch altogether with the meaning of life.

My son went with some friends to Stuttgart last Tuesday evening and watched, with some 100,000 fans, Germany play Poland on enormous television screens set up in the central square of the city. He said that when Germany scored the winning goal in injury time it was an amazing experience to be among so many people when, of a sudden, they erupted in an experience of perfect euphoria. But, of course, what does such joy mean in the prospect of the day of the Lord? What of their great joy over a World Cup football match result then? What does the birth of a child or the death of a loved one; what does the satisfaction of some accomplishment or success or the pain or discouragement of some setback or defeat; what does any of this mean – really – in the prospect of the day of the Lord. Do not fear the one who can kill the body; fear the one who having killed the body can cast the soul into hell! It was our Savior who said that. Everything means at last only what it will amount to on the day of the Lord

Israel's problem in Amos' day was that she had lost faith in the promise of God to judge those who are unfaithful to him. She was still very religious, to be sure. They took their religious obligations seriously; more seriously than most people do nowadays. The people made pilgrimages to the important shrines. They brought sacrifices and offerings to their worship. That worship cost them something – think of the outlay on animals for sacrifice – and, apparently it was emotionally satisfying for the Israelites. They loved the music, they came home refreshed. Perhaps they would have said that they always got a sense of God when they were at Gilgal or Bethel. They felt nearer to him when they were at worship.

But if religion does not get a person *through to* God it is worthless. If worship does not connect a person with the living God *as he is and always will be* it is worse than useless because it creates a false impression of God and of the worshipper's relationship to God. Do you remember the man who wrote Psalm 73? His heart had grown cold and doubts about God and about the life of faith had begun to creep into his mind. He was a substantial believing man, but his faith was wavering. He was beginning to envy the unbelievers who were enjoying earthly prosperity and pleasure and didn't struggle over personal godliness the way he had to every day: resisting temptations, mortifying his sins, forcing himself to obey God's commandments. Why couldn't his life be easy like theirs, he was asking himself. And then he went to worship and, because it was faithful worship, he met God there, or, better, God met him. And what was impressed upon his heart by the singing, the praying, the preaching, and the sacrifices of that

worship? “Then I understood their final destiny.” *He got back a living sense of the day of the Lord.*

That changed everything. His heart was full of love for God – “whom have I in heaven but you and earth has nothing I desire besides you” – and desire for God – “But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.”

What was it again that led to this ecstasy and this new resolve and this holy determination to live for the Lord? It was the realization, once again, as he himself put it,

“Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.”

“Then I understood their final destiny.” I realized in a moment that there is a judgment coming upon all mankind and that by faith in the Lord I will be vindicated in that judgment. I had come to think about the present without regard to the day of the Lord and forgetting *that* my entire life began to unravel. It was living without regard to the most important truth of all. Remembering it brought me back to God and to the joy of my salvation.

It may be, at first, hard to understand how the promise of the judgment of the wicked could do us so much good, but it does. Do you remember that passage in Revelation 14?

“Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation, tribe, language, and people [now, remember, “gospel” means “good news”]. He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God, and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come.’”

The good news the angel bore was that the hour of judgment had come; the day of the Lord had arrived. It is when men and women reckon with God’s wrath, when they face it squarely, when they bring home this coming reality to their hearts and lives in the present that they are set free to reckon with God himself. This truth that they have refused to believe and have held at arms length proves to be the key that unlocks the door that leads to the throne-room of the living God of love and mercy.

Amos didn’t preach the day of the Lord to take his revenge on an unresponsive audience. He preached the day of the Lord in hopes that some in Israel would lift her eyes to see the true and living God and, seeing him, would trust him, love him, and serve him. That is what happened to the man in Psalm 73: the conviction of God’s wrath upon the unbelieving and the disobedient led him to God’s love for those who trust in him; and God’s love, poured out into his heart, led him to peace and joy in believing.

Here is the paradox of life and reality. *You will never love and truly serve a God you do not fear.* You have no great reason to love God if he has not delivered you from something terrible and given you something wonderful. The true and living God is a God to be feared and it is precisely for that reason that he is a God to be loved. There is such a thing as salvation – salvation from

the wrath of God – and it is given to those who truly believe what God’s wrath threatens and from what God’s grace delivers. It is that fact that once it grips our hearts must rule our lives.

Imagine with me – as every Christian does and must from time to time – that moment when we awake after death or that very moment when the trumpet sounds and the lightning flashes and the whole world realizes that its king has returned. What will they think who have forgotten and ignored the day of the Lord? What will you think, what thrill will pass through your soul, you who have remembered it?