

The Day of the Lord

Throughout the prophets, the term “the day of the Lord” points to the time when God will come down from heaven as a warrior to execute judgment against His enemies. Many commentators treat these references essentially as poetic exaggerations. A careful examination of the actual prophecies however, coupled with the New Testament interpretation of these texts leads us to conclude that they must be taken at face value. Jesus the Messiah—YHVH in the flesh—will actually come down from heaven to execute judgment against the wicked. For this reason, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul actually refers to the day of the Lord as “the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 15:5).

Temporal or the Ultimate Judgment?

As we begin to discuss the concept of the day of the Lord, we must qualify that in some cases, the day of the Lord is applied to temporal judgments within history. For example, in the Prophecy of Joel, it is used of God’s historical judgment against Israel that came through a wave of locust plagues (1:6,15). Most often however, the term, “the day of the Lord” points to the ultimate judgment of God at the end of this age. In Isaiah 13 for example, the final day of the Lord is described in very vivid terms:

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near!
It will come as destruction from the Almighty.
Therefore all hands will fall limp,
And every man’s heart will melt.
They will be terrified,
Pains and anguish will take hold of them;
They will writhe like a woman in labor,
They will look at one another in astonishment,
Their faces aflame.
Behold, the day of the Lord is coming,
Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
To make the land a desolation;
And He will exterminate its sinners from it.
For the stars of heaven and their constellations
Will not flash forth their light;
The sun will be dark when it rises
And the moon will not shed its light.
Thus I will punish the world for its evil

And the wicked for their iniquity;
I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud
And abase the haughtiness of the ruthless.
I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold
And mankind than the gold of Ophir. (Is 13:6–12).

The passage almost exclusively uses negative language to describe this day. It is a time of wailing and weeping. It is time when sinners will feel the “burning anger” of God’s judgments against them. It will be time defined by natural calamities and celestial disturbances. It is critical to note that the New Testament specifically associates the celestial signs in this text with the return of Jesus (Mat 24:29; Rev 6:12-14).

Later, the prophet Ezekiel would similarly describe the day of the Lord as, “a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations.” (Eze 30:2–3). Likewise, Obadiah describes it as the day when all of the injustices committed against Israel will come back onto those who perpetrated them:

For the day of the Lord draws near on all the nations.
As you have done, it will be done to you.
Your dealings will return on your own head. (Obadiah 15)

In Isaiah 34, the day of the Lord is cast as the day when the Lord will punish the Gentile nations for their mistreatment of Israel:

For the Lord’s indignation is against all the nations,
And His wrath against all their armies;
He has utterly destroyed them,
He has given them over to slaughter...
For the Lord has a day of vengeance,
A year of recompense for the cause of Zion. (Is 34:2,8)

The KJV translates, “the cause of Zion” as “the controversy of Zion.” Zion here is likely a metaphor for all of Israel. The Lord will execute judgment against the nations hostile to His people, not in the form of bitter revenge, but as an act of justice. Similarly, the prophet Joel says that God, “will gather all the nations” and judge them, “On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel” (Joel 3:2). He then specifies four reasons why they will be judged:

1. Because they “have scattered” the Jewish people among the nations (3:2),

2. because they “have divided up My land” (3:2),
3. because they enslaved Jewish prisoners of war (3:3,6),
4. and because they stole Israel’s wealth and resources (3:5).

The Day of the Lord Against Israel

While most references to the day of the Lord emphasize the Lord’s judgment against the Gentiles, Amos the prophet also provides a profound twist in the plot. Amos warns Israel not to long for that day, as it is also a time when Israel will be punished:

Alas, you who are longing for the day of the Lord,
For what purpose will the day of the Lord be to you?
It will be darkness and not light (Am 5:18)

Amos thus rebuked those who held to the popular view that merely being Jewish during the day of the Lord would guarantee their safety. Many within Israel failed to recognize that their ethnic and national identity was no guarantee of their deliverance. If their lives were corrupt, then they also would be judged in that day. Thus, while the day of the Lord is principally focused on God’s judgment of the Gentiles, it will also be a time of tremendous pain, chastisement, and thus “darkness” for Israel. In this sense, the day of the Lord and “the time of Jacob’s trouble,” while distinct, do share much in common. While Jacob’s trouble or tribulation is largely focused on Israel’s chastisement, the day of the Lord is largely focused on the Gentile nations.

Conclusion

From Moses to Jesus, the Scriptures teach that in the last days, there will be a period of great pain and suffering for the whole world. The Lord’s purposes for this time will be to chastise His people, to judge the nations, to purge the world of wickedness, and ultimately to save Israel, and usher in the time of redemption. Despite the great pains of these days, the Lord will have the last word. Israel’s national repentance and salvation, and the ultimate restoration of all things will follow immediately at the heels of this ‘day.’