

The Day of the LORD

By
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What shall it be like when the Almighty decides to visit? Is it desirous that He should do so? Essentially, it depends on one's obedience to Him in His "absence." For those who have remained righteous, the Day of His visitation will be one of blessing. For the wicked, however, the Day of the LORD will bring judgment, destruction, and terror. The prophets in the Old Testament speak regularly about this visit, building upon a concept introduced in Exodus 32.34. Here, the LORD reveals to Moses His decision to return in judgment of sin at an undisclosed future time. This is the "Day of the LORD" which gradually becomes more vivid in the progress of revelation, especially in the writing prophets.

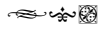

It should be pointed out, however, that no *one* prophet discusses the Day of the LORD in such a way as to draw out *all* of its implications. This makes it helpful (and necessary) to study all of the prophets, collecting different angles on the concept as portrayed by each and compiling these together toward a biblical theology of the Day of the LORD. Furthermore, not every writing prophet even discusses the concept.¹ The Day of the LORD as understood by the Hebrews—and expressed in the prophets—is a multifaceted concept. Five aspects of the Day of the LORD—nearness, judgment, terror, call to repentance, and restoration—may be readily drawn from a study of the texts in which the phrase occurs.²

Nearness of the Day of the LORD

This prominent theme appears clearly in Obadiah 15, Joel 1.15 & 3.14, Isaiah 13.6, Zephaniah 1.14, and Ezekiel 30.3. The term "near," however, carries a two-fold nuance. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the temporal nearness of the Day of the LORD. That is, it is exclusively future and the emphasis is on the immanency of its arrival. This is clearly seen in Isaiah 13, with phrases like "the Day of the LORD is coming." Concerning this passage, Young summarizes the nearness aspect of the LORD's wrathful appearance as "sudden and irresistible."³ This impending future nuance is also present in Joel 1.15 where, according to Cooke, "*the Day* is used in a pregnant sense, of the coming punishment of the heathen."⁴

Beyond the exclusively future nuance of the "nearness" aspect of the Day of the LORD is the present (or realized) nearness. That is, the Day is near in a physical, or locative, sense; so near, in fact, that it is already being felt. This is so in Joel 1.16-20, where present famine-like conditions are said to indicate the nearness of the Day of the LORD. Smith agrees, calling the locust plague in Joel "a precursor of the day of the LORD."⁵ This "realized" Day of the LORD as a partially-present condition is also seen in Ezekiel 7.7 with the juxtaposition, "The time has come, the day is near." Concerning this context, Smith paraphrases

¹ The Day of the LORD is discussed in three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and seven minor prophets (Obadiah, Joel, Amos, Hosea, Zephaniah, Micah, and Malachi). This means that seven prophets do not address the subject in print (Daniel, Lamentations—though see 2.22, "the day of the anger of the LORD," Nahum, Jonah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah).

² One must keep in mind, however, that the concept of the Day of the LORD is not restricted to the Hebrew construction  but can also be implied by using the demonstrative pronoun adjectivally ( = "that day") as in Jeremiah 46.10, Hosea 2.18, and Amos 9.11.

³ Edward J. Young, ed., *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 1, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 419.

⁴ G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel*, The International Critical Commentary, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 331. The same sense is also said to occur in Isaiah 13.6.

⁵ Gary V. Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers: An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers), 231.

Ezekiel, “It is near! It is now, not in the distant future!”⁶ The nearness of the Day of the LORD, then, often carries the dual nuance of immanent future and present reality.

Judgment in the Day of the LORD

Drawing on the justice and holiness of Yahweh, this concept is particularly seen in Obadiah 15, Joel 1.15 & 2.31, Isaiah 2.11 & 13.6, Jeremiah 46.10, Amos 5.20, Zephaniah 1.7ff, Ezekiel 13.5 & 30.3, and Malachi 4.1. Perhaps no term characterizes the notorious Day of the LORD as the word “judgment.” In this vein is Hill and Walton’s comment, “In the Day of the LORD, justice is done. This is a positive time for victims, but a day of reckoning for oppressors.”⁷ Allusions and foreshadowing of the great judgment of Yahweh are sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, but its fullest and most comprehensive expression is saved for this Day.⁸ The picture of clouds (Ezekiel 30.3; Zephaniah 1.15) and fire (Isaiah 10.16; Zephaniah 1.18; Amos 1.3; Jeremiah 21.14; Ezekiel 21.1-4) in describing the judgment of God is common in the prophets.⁹ Furthermore, notice should be taken of the *names* of God in the discourses pertaining to His judgment. For instance, in Isaiah 2.12, Jeremiah 46.10, and Malachi 4.1 the military term “LORD of hosts” is used, while Joel 1.15 records “Almighty,” an expression of omnipotence. These indicate that He is not only *worthy* to judge wickedness (as the Holy One) but is also fully *capable* of carrying out the task.

Terror in the Day of the LORD

The natural response to a vengeful God preparing to carry out His righteous judgment is terror and dread, seen especially in Isaiah 2.19-21 & 13.7-9, Zephaniah 1.14-15, and Joel 3.16. The greatness of the wrath of God to be poured out on men in the Day of the LORD is highlighted by the prophets in eliciting just such emotions in their hearers. The judgment poured out on Babylon in Isaiah 13 draws out terror which foreshadows that of the final judgment. It involved “convulsing agitation and desperate perplexity” and writhing “in bitter pain like the mother that is bearing her child.”¹⁰ Such terrible wrath will be poured out that even the stars of heaven will withhold light. The heavens and earth will tremble, according to Joel. “Man has had his day... . Now, Yahweh is to have His day.”¹¹ This persuades men to—in the words of Isaiah—hide from “the terror of the LORD” (2.10, 19, 21).

Repentance in light of the Day of the LORD

This theme is closely linked with that of terror, for the prophets often hoped to instill enough terror in their hearers by discussing the Day of the LORD that the nation would repent and avoid this Day of destruction. A call to repentance is found especially in Zephaniah 2.2-3. Reminiscent of Micah 6.8, this passage calls the hearers to “seek the LORD” and “seek righteousness, seek humility,” thereby offering the hope of escaping the terrible Day of the LORD. In the words of Smith, “He offered them a choice: experience the wrath of God on the day of the LORD, or seek God and transform your lives before the day of the LORD. Those who will humble themselves, seek God’s mercy, and pursue righteousness will enjoy the pleasures of the glorious kingdom of God.”¹² Similarly, in Joel 2.12-17 there is a call to lament and so

⁶ Ibid., 261.

⁷ Andrew E. Hill, and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 408.

⁸ Young, 124. Young goes on to note that the destruction of Babylon is one expression of the judgment of God, but the Day of the LORD indicates the *final* measure of judgment (pg. 419).

⁹ Hinkley G. Mitchell, John Merlin Powis Smith, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, The International Critical Commentary, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 80.

¹⁰ Young, 420.

¹¹ Ibid., 124.

¹² Smith, 176.

avoid the coming wrath of the Day of the LORD.¹³ The reality of the wrath of God in the Day of the LORD must, then, be predicated always in light of His indescribable patience and lovingkindness.

Restoration in the Day of the LORD

Along with the nearness, judgment, terror, and call for repentance in light of the Day of the LORD exists language of great blessing and rebuilding initiated by that same hand of God. This aspect of the Day of the LORD, known as restoration, is seen especially in Joel 1.15, Amos 9.11-15, Hosea 2.18-23, Micah 4.6-8, and Malachi 4.5.¹⁴ In commenting on the implied hope of restoration in Malachi 4.5, Smith states “On the Day of the LORD, God will dwell in Zion, roar against His enemies, and give the land back to His people.”¹⁵ This concept of victory and restoration is seen clearly in Obadiah, where he “bolstered future hope among the remnant of Jacob in affirming the final triumph of Yahweh in the world order.”¹⁶ Most certainly, these prophets understood a logical and temporal order to these two events of judgment and restoration in the Day of the LORD. First, the LORD had to surface and purify His people with a judgment of fire. After this—and only *after*—He would restore His people to a position of honor higher than before.¹⁷ The hearers of these prophecies of judgment and destruction accompanying the Day of the LORD, then, only properly respond to these warnings when they shake with terror and fully repent. *After* this, it is wholly appropriate to express hope in the immanent visit of the Almighty.

Conclusion

In many of the prophetic texts addressing the Day of the LORD, it is clear that the Day can be a time of unprecedented destruction or of overwhelming blessing—contingent on one’s obedience to Yahweh. According to Obadiah, it is upon those who treat others unfairly that destruction will come. In Isaiah, judgment falls on the proud one. In Amos, however, the Day of the LORD is to be longed for by the righteous, though there will be great darkness for the wicked. The message of the Day of the LORD, then, is that its *coming* is inevitable. Its *harshness*, though, is directly related to our disobedience to Yahweh: The greater the disobedience, the greater the destruction; the greater the righteousness, the greater the blessing.

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¹³ Ibid., 236. See also Hill, 367, who states: “[Joel] began by correlating the current locust plague with the inception of the Day of the LORD in anticipation that the judgment would get worse. Consequently he called on the people to repent...”

¹⁴ An expectation of restoration had also contributed to poor eschatology for the wicked, who expected God to pour out blessings regardless of one’s righteousness. This inaccurate expectation is especially addressed in Amos 5.18-20, and is summarized by William Rainey Harper, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Amos and Hosea*, The International Critical Commentary, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 131, where it is written, “They looked forward to it as a day when Yahweh would (unconditionally) give them triumphant victory over all their enemies and thereby establish himself as supreme among the gods” and “Looking forward to Yahweh’s day as a time of joy and blessing, they scornfully refuse to heed the prophet’s warning’s of calamity” (pg. 198.).

¹⁵ Smith, 239.

¹⁶ Hill and Walton, 381.

¹⁷ Ibid., 409. These authors go so far as to call the restoration proclamations of Zephaniah the “aftermath oracles,” emphasizing their secondary nature.

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