



What is the Day of the Lord?

Lesson 1

Do you ever look around at the way life is going and wonder to yourself, “When is God going to do something about this?” Do you ever find yourself frustrated with the injustice of the world? Do you ever feel like evil people are on top and for some reason they seem to be getting away with it? Perhaps most troubling, does it ever seem like God’s people are the ones who are being treated wrongly and God doesn’t seem to be doing anything about it?

If so, don’t worry; you’re not alone. This question has plagued the people of God since the time of Israel. It was a question that the New Testament church found itself wrestling with. And it is a question that God’s people throughout the church age have all needed to answer with a response of faith when living by sight was too discouraging. And fortunately the Bible gives an answer to this perplexing question. The answer is that there is a coming a day when God will deal with this problem of injustice and wickedness once and for all. In the prophets of the Old Testament, we see a phrase that begins to be repeated, that brings hope to those discouraged by the injustice around them, a word the writers of the New Testament pick up and boldly apply to Christ. That phrase is “the Day of the Lord.” Scripture’s answer to the problem of evil is to wait, because one day God will address this problem. We call that day, the Day of the Lord.

Why does God wait? Why does he not simply deal with evil now?

As we think about the Day of the Lord, we want to begin by asking what “The Day of the Lord” means then then there are two other important questions we need to answer. (1) What exactly does Scripture mean when it talks about the Day of the Lord? How do the prophets use that phrase, and how should it inform our thinking? (2) Did the Day of the Lord happen yet? As we read the prophecies of the Old Testament, are we reading predictions of things that have already happened or things that are going to happen? ¹ The rest of our lesson will seek to answer these two questions.

¹ A more technical dispute for those who study this issue is whether to include all references to “that day” or “the day” when we go studying the Old Testament prophets, or if we should limit our study to the stock phrase “the Day of the Lord.” Although some will only count the exact phrase “Day of the

I. Meaning of the Phrase

What does the phrase “Day of the Lord” mean? At the most basic level, it refers to the day that belongs to God. The nature of this day is not necessarily a 24 hour period of time, but rather a more generic reference to “the time that belongs to Yahweh.”² In other words, this is a special chunk of time that belongs to God. So then the question becomes, “What does God do on his day?” To answer that question, we will want to see what types of things the prophets talk about when discussing the day of the Lord.

When we start reading passages about the Day of the Lord, certain key ideas float to the surface. What does God do on his day? He (1) judges the wicked and (2) vindicates the righteous. A lot more detail could be added to this simple definition, but at its core these two ideas sum up all what God does on his day. The Day of the Lord is either really good news or really bad news depending on which side of history you end up on. However, the prophets throw a slight twist in this scheme by pointing out to Israel and Judah that God’s judgment on the wicked will include them to if they do not turn from their wicked ways. Let’s take a look at each of these components then: God’s judgment on foreign nations, God’s judgment on his rebellious people, and God’s vindication of the righteous.

A. God’s Judgment of Foreign Nations

As we open our Bibles to study the Day of the Lord, the first thing we observe is that this is frequently seen as a day when God will judge the wicked nations who have oppressed Israel for their evil. The books of Obadiah and Nahum are directed entirely at foreign nations (Edom and Assyria respectively), and threaten God’s punishment for their wrongdoing. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos all contain lengthy prophecies directed at Israel’s enemies (Isaiah 13-23; Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32; Amos 1-2).

In addition to specific nations, the prophets also envision a day when all the nations of the world will be judged by God (Joel 3:2-14; Obadiah 15; Zechariah 14:1-3). All the nations are described as coming up against Israel for battle, but God shows up and soundly defeats them all. He then judges them for their sin against his people and establishes his kingdom over all of them. As we will see in our final lesson, these themes become very important for the New Testament understanding of the Day of the Lord.

Lord” when studying this theme, for our purposes we will include passages that refer to the “day” in a number of different ways (i.e. “that day” “the day” etc.).

² Robert Bell, *The Theological messages of the Old Testament*, page 374. Although the word “day” normally means a 24 hour period of time, it does not always mean this. Context must decide whether a 24 hour time period is in mind, or a more generic reference (e.g. “Back in my father’s day...”). As we will see, the “Day of the Lord” is probably a more general use of the word.

How can these prophecies be a help to American believers in the 21st century who have no ill will against Tyre, Assyria, or Egypt?

B. Vindication of the Righteous

Not only will God judge the wicked, but he will also reward his people. Those who found themselves following God but languishing under the hand of oppressive evil-doers would take their rightful place as the new rulers under God's kingdom. Those who call on God's name will be delivered (Joel 2:32). God is a stronghold for those who trust him (Nahum 1:7) but brings his enemies to an end (Nahum 1:8). Those who have sought righteousness will be hid in the day of the Lord's anger (Zephaniah 2:3), and God will reward everyone according to their deeds, both good and evil (Obadiah 15-18).

The great hope of Judah and Israel, living in the shadow of enemies on every side was that God would come and in his coming he would bring justice. No doubt these prophecies brought hope to a discouraged and downcast people. The thought of the Creator God himself showing up and taking down Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria and instead installing this tiny country in between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea as the greatest of world superpowers was one that gave hope, but it was a hope based on faith and not on sight.

How can the church today relate to Israel and Judah's situation? In what ways do believers find themselves hoping for something in the future that seems unlikely if not impossible?

How did God expect Israel and Judah to maintain this hope? How should we maintain it?

C. Judgment on Rebellious Israel

But there is an interesting twist on the day of the Lord that we find in the Old Testament prophets. As carnal Israel complacently looks forward to the day when God will come and teach all these wicked nations a thing or two, God's prophets come with a message that might surprise them: "The Day of the Lord is coming for you, too, and it isn't going to be pretty."

Perhaps Amos is the clearest about this. His book begins with oracles of judgment against the nations. He calls out Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, Edom, Ammon, and Moab for their wickedness and threatens to bring judgment. He then moves on to warn that Israel's southern neighbor and spiritual brother Judah will also face God's judgment for their sins.

No doubt the royal court of Israel would have been pleased thus far to hear this southern farmer turned prophet railing on Israel's enemies. But Amos saves the best for last, and in his final oracle he rails against Israel for their wickedness and warns that God's judgment is coming against *them*, culminating in a warning of the disaster that will strike "in that day" (Amos 2:16).

Later on in the book, Amos asks the nation of Israel why in the world they are looking forward to the Day of the Lord (Amos 5:18-20). No doubt sensing the confused look on the faces of the people hearing this message (after all, why would God judge *his own* people who were faithfully worshiping him?), Amos makes a clarification. Although Israel no doubt thought she was fine because of her ritualistic service to God, in reality God found their worship nauseating when it was not being matched by righteous living (Amos 5:21-24).

Amos isn't the only prophet to warn about God's day coming up for Israel and Judah, in fact as we are going to see the prophet Joel spends the first two chapters of his book warning Judah that God's day was coming for them, and it was going to be incredibly hard. Isaiah, Zephaniah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah all connect the day of God's judgment with his own people. Claiming a relationship with God is not enough. A life that rejects God's commands demonstrates that the profession of a love for God is likely a facade and an excuse for a sinful lifestyle (John 14:15).

Why do people often assume that they are exempt from the judgment of God?

How can we as New Testament believers take these warnings to heart? Does the New Testament ever warn believers not to presume on God's mercy?

II. The Timing of the Day of the Lord

We must now ask if this Day came, or if it is still coming. After all, if Isaiah and Jeremiah and Obadiah and Nahum all describe this coming day as bringing God's wrath on countries like Egypt, Assyria, and Edom, has God done that already or is this referring to a future day? And if we want to say that he has judged these nations, what do we do with the strong language describing the moon turning to blood (Joel 2:31), God himself appearing (Malachi 3:1-5), and an international kingdom being established (Zechariah 14:16-19)?

Do you think the Day of the Lord is future or past?

The answer to this question comes when we realize that these prophecies are both referring to the immediate future and to the ultimate future. There is a near fulfillment (which by our point have already happened), and there is a far fulfillment (which has yet to happen). God has brought his justice and judgment in the past (history), but he also will bring it in the future (eschatology). This pattern of mixing the far distant future with the up and coming is a common feature of the prophets ³ and it is helpful to understand how it works. ⁴ As we continue our study, we will see that some descriptions of this Day are clearly future, while some have already happened, and at times deciding which is which can be somewhat difficult.

A. The Historical Day of the Lord

It seems pretty clear as we read these prophecies that some of them have already been fulfilled. In this way, the Day of the Lord has come, somewhat, but not fully. Babylon was indeed punished by God for her wickedness and the small, broken nation of Judah was vindicated (Habakkuk 3:1-6). Nineveh and Assyria were destroyed as God had warned would happen (Nahum 1:1-15; Zephaniah 2:1-15). Not only that, God's devastation of the city of Jerusalem is seen as a fulfillment of the Day of the Lord (Lamentations 2:21-22).

³ This is often referred to as *prophetic telescoping*. This happens when events soon to happen from the perspective of the prophets and events that will happen thousands of years later are compressed into a single account. Often it is challenging to figure out where one idea ends and the other begins.

⁴ A helpful, if somewhat technical description of how this works can be found in Bell, *Theological Messages*, 378: "To understand the eschatological significance of the passages, one must grasp an important principle: the prophet's words concerning the day of the Lord find their fulfillment in type and anti-type. A study of the passages concerned leaves one with two very different classes of statements: those which seem to point literally to events about to overtake nations on account of sins which are often spelled out, and those which seem to indicate something unusual, something never yet seen in the world's history, such as Yahweh's coming in person to judge and to rescue a remnant. From the known fulfillment of other Old Testament passages comes a hint of a solution. In 2 Samuel 7: 12-16 the prophet Nathan prophesied before David; we now know that some of his predictions were fulfilled by David son Solomon and some by David's son Christ. For example, it was true concerning Solomon that "If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men," but this was hardly true of Christ. On the other hand, the writer of Hebrews makes it plain that the phrase "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" was spoken in reference to Christ. Furthermore, the phrase "I will establish his kingdom" actually can refer to both Solomon and Christ though it refers to Christ in a much fuller sense. Now on the basis of this passage and the events of history, Bible students have considered Solomon to be a type of Christ. Evidently it was God's plan first of all to give the prophecy, containing elements relating specifically to the type, elements relating specifically to the anti type, and elements relating generally to both. Then the type appeared on the scene so that God's people could get a visible intangible idea of what was to come. In the type were completely fulfilled those elements relating specifically to it; therefore, as far as those elements were concerned, God's people needed to look no further. Of course, in the type was also present certain of the general characteristics in a limited sense so as to prefigure a much more complete realization of them in the anti type finally the anti type was to appear, fulfilling that specific characteristics and the general characteristics.

This is important because it means that God will not wait until the end of all time before bringing any justice. He will wait until the end of time before bringing about complete justice, but God is active today rewarding good and punishing evil. We should not expect that final justice will look exactly like what we see today, but we should still ask God to address the evil of today, not only in the ultimate Day of the Lord when Christ returns but even before that in the here and now.

How does knowing that God does not wait until the end to measure out all of his justice, but that throughout history he still rewards good and punishes evil, how does knowing this make a difference?

Why is it important that we temper this understanding with the realization that God's justice does ultimately await the end of time?

B. The Eschatological Day of the Lord

It's hard to read the prophets and come away with the conclusion that none of what God has threatened the nations with has come to pass. Babylon, Tyre, Sidon, Edom, many of these countries did see the disaster God warned about come upon them. But it's also hard to read the Old Testament prophets and walk away satisfied that everything that God has promised has come to pass. Evil kingdoms still exert their power over the righteous. God's people still suffer under the hand of powerful and wicked people. And the nation of Israel has yet to see the wonderful kingdom that God promised. The Day of the Lord is still coming.

Not only should we expect the coming Day of the Lord because some of the prophecies of the Old Testament have not been fulfilled, but the writers of the New Testament pick up the theme of the Day of the Lord and apply it to Christ. Paul warns that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2), and Peter makes the same warning (2 Peter 3:10). Both of them are picking up on the teaching of Jesus concerning his return (Matthew 24:43-44). Elsewhere Paul speaks of being ready for "the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:10), of looking forward to the reward he will receive "on that day" (2 Timothy 4:8), and of being ready for "that day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel" (Romans 2:16).

Has the Day of the Lord come? Yes and no. God has brought a certain measure of justice, but that victory is not yet complete and it won't be until Christ comes in his power and majesty. In the meantime, we find ourselves hoping and looking for the Day of the Lord.

Unwrapping how the prophets of the Old Testament thought about this important theme matters, because as we will see the New Testament writers pick up the message of the Day of the Lord and apply it to Christ. For this reason, we are going to take some time over the next couple weeks and dive in on two books that prominently deal with this theme. As we have seen, this is a theme that pervades the prophets, but Joel and Obadiah in particular seem to zero in on this issue. So over the next few weeks we will be studying these books, and as we study them we will find that they teach us much about the coming Day of the Lord. As we do this, we will find ourselves learning about how to study the prophets, the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament, and most especially what it means to live in light of the coming Day of the Lord.