
The Day of the Lord

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DEFINITION

The phrase “the day of the LORD [Yahweh]” refers both to the ultimate time when Yahweh will punish and restore the whole world through Christ’s first and second comings and to the periodic pen-ultimate days that clarify and anticipate it. Unrepentant sinners should fear the day of the Lord, but those forgiven and redeemed can anticipate it with hope.

SUMMARY

The phrase “the day of the LORD [Yahweh]” refers both to the ultimate time when Yahweh will punish and restore the whole world through Christ’s first and second comings and to the periodic pen-ultimate days that clarify and anticipate it. The OT portrays the day as punishment through overlapping images of cataclysm, war, and sacrifice; it highlights the day as renewal by emphasizing how God’s presence will rest on his people in the midst of a messianic Davidic reign. The NT then identifies Christ Jesus as the one who fulfills the ultimate day of the Lord, inaugurating it in his death and resurrection and consummating it at his second coming. For the elect, Jesus’s death signals the satisfaction of God’s wrath against sin, and his resurrection marks the start of the new creation. For non-believers, however, the day of the Lord’s wrath is still future, and it will come with cataclysm, war, and sacrifice, as the warrior God will enter into space and time to punish his enemy and to reconstitute right order, wherein he is exalted over all. Unrepentant sinners should fear the day of the Lord, but those forgiven and redeemed can anticipate it with hope.

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WHAT IS THE DAY OF THE LORD?

The phrase “the day of Yahweh” and its abbreviated parallels (e.g., “the/that day”) refer both to the ultimate time when Yahweh will punish and restore/re-create the whole world and to the periodic pen-ultimate days that clarify and anticipate it. In this context, therefore, “day” refers more to an *event* in time rather than an *extent* of time. On the one hand, God’s prophets and apostles identify the day of the Lord as the climactic event when God establishes his sovereignty, eradicates all evil, and brings lasting peace on a universal scale (e.g., Zeph 1:14–18; 3:8–10; 2 Thess 1:9–10; 2 Pet 3:10). This reality is inaugurated in Christ’s first coming but only consummated at his second coming. On the other hand, biblical figures also apply the language of “the day of the Lord” to the various instances where Yahweh typologically intrudes into space and time to reconstitute right order through punishing wickedness—not only that of the broad world (Jer 46:10–12; Obad 15; Zeph 3:8)¹ but also that of Israel/Judah (Ezek 13:5; Amos 5:18; Zech 14:1).²

Along with being a time of divine wrath, the day of the Lord realizes the hope of a reconstituted, eschatological sabbath (Heb 4:9, 11). On the seventh day of the creation week, Yahweh God rested from all of his labor (Gen 2:1–3), identifying that proper order exists in the world only where creation celebrates God as sovereign over all, reigning from his temple (Ps 132:7–8, 13–14). Humanity’s rebellion in the Garden ruptured kingdom peace, resulting in King Yahweh the Creator rising as the Warrior. Working again (see John 5:17; 9:3; 14:10), he committed to re-establish kingdom rest and order, ultimately through his messianic, sin-overcoming deliver (Gen 3:15; Zech 3:9; 13:1; Matt 11:28–30). From the perspective of salvation history, the day of God’s sovereign rest at the end of the first creation week becomes not only a testament of what was but a portrait of what should and would be. The goal to which history is moving is the day of the Lord, which culminates in a new creation on the other side of punishment. Here Yahweh is exalted through his messianic Davidic king (e.g., Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–10; Jer 23:5; Ezek 37:24), and the remnant people that remain enjoy God’s presence and are holy and at peace (e.g., Isa 4:2–6; Zeph 3:11–20; Zech 14:1–21).³

¹ Cf. Isa 2:10–22; 13:1–22; Ezek 30:1–9; Joel 3:9–16.

² Cf. Isa 3:1–4:1; Joel 1:15; 2:1–11, 31; Amos 5:18; Zeph 3:7; Mal 4:5[3:23].

³ Cf. Joel 2:28–32; Amos 9:11–15.

HOW DOES THE OLD TESTAMENT DEPICT THE DAY OF THE LORD?

The impending day of the Lord includes both punishment and renewal.

The Day of the Lord as Punishment

The destructive elements of Yahweh's day are directly due to his just wrath against covenant rebellion. "The LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low" (Isa 2:12; cf. Isa 13:9; Mal 4:1[3:19]). There will be no help for the rebel in that day (Isa 10:3–4; 24:5–6; 33:14; Joel 2:11).

The OT uses overlapping images of cataclysm, conquest, and sacrifice to describe the impending time of fury. Whereas the former depictions forewarn of disaster in the natural and personal realms, the latter two figures portray Yahweh judicially punishing enemies as the means for his justly reconstituting right order in his world. Justice demands that God chasten, for he can secure atonement only through the shedding of blood, whether of a substitute or of the sinner (Lev 17:11; Num 35:33; 2 Sam 21:3; Isa 22:14).

Cataclysm

With echoes of the Lord's encounter with Adam and Eve following their sin (Gen 3:8) and of his appearance before Israel at Mount Sinai to establish the old covenant (Exod 19:16), the biblical authors often associate Yahweh's day of wrath with darkness, wind, earthquake, and clouds. "You will be visited by the LORD of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire" (Isa 29:6; cf. Isa 30:30; Joel 2:30–31). The foreboding images of tempest and shadow, gloom and quaking display Yahweh's fierce and impending presence and highlight the nearness of his day of destruction against both individuals (2 Sam 22:12; Job 15:22) and nations (Isa 13:10; 30:30),⁴ including Israel/Judah (Isa 5:30; 8:22; 29:6).⁵

Whereas many in Israel envisioned the day of the Lord to be one of light, the prophets stressed that for all the unrepentant, it would indeed be night. "Why would

⁴ Cf. Isa 30:33; Ezek 30:3; Joel 3:15; Zeph 1:15.

⁵ Cf. Joel 2:2, 30–31; Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9.

you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light” (Amos 5:18; cf. Mic 3:6). “When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD” (Ezek 32:7–8).⁶ When God enters our space and time, the natural forces react; storms awaken and ground quakes. Such depictions of Yahweh’s day should cause hearts to tremble.

Conquest

The darkness of the day of the Lord may at times refer not to storm but to the sensory experience of dying as a victim of divine war. On Yahweh’s day, the lights of life indeed go out for the enemies of God. Thus, Zephaniah portrayed the day of the Lord as one of “distress and anguish, . . . ruin and devastation, . . . darkness and gloom, . . . clouds and thick darkness”—indeed, “a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements” (Zeph 1:15–16). Such images recall Yahweh’s conquest of Canaan (cf. Num 13:28; Deut 1:28; 3:5; 9:1 with Deut 6:10–11; Josh 6:5, 20) and portray his day of wrath as a more ultimate conquest, wherein God reestablishes a new people in a transformed land (cf. Zeph 1:13 with Deut 6:10–11; 28:30, 39).

Yahweh is a roaring lion (Hos 11:10; Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2)—a warrior who fights against his adversaries to deliver his faithful remnant (cf. Exod 15:3; Ps 24:8). “The LORD utters his voice before his army, for his camp is exceedingly great; he who executes his word is powerful. For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome” (Joel 2:11). “Behold, a day is coming for the LORD, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle. . . . Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations” (Zech 14:1–3; cf. Jer 46:10). At times, the text is explicit that other powers will serve as the agents of God’s retribution, operating as the “rod” of his anger (Isa 10:5; cf. Mic 6:9) and his “weapon” of war (Isa 13:5; Jer 51:20).

Trumpets often served as battle alarms, whether for offense (Num 10:9; Job 39:24) or defense (Jer 42:4; Amos 3:6; Neh 4:20). Drawing on this reality, the OT authors regularly link trumpet blasts with Yahweh’s pen-ultimate and ultimate day of

⁶ Cf. Joel 2:2, 10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:15.

battle, whether to arouse the aggressor (Jer 51:27; Zeph 1:16; Zech 9:14) or to warn the target (Jer 6:1; Ezek 33:3; Joel 2:1).⁷ In such a day, the sound is bitter (Zeph 1:14).

Sacrifice

After highlighting the nearness of the day of the Lord, the prophet Zephaniah grounded this statement in the reality that God had already “prepared a *sacrifice*” (Zeph 1:7). Sacrificial fires are nothing less than a divine war against sin. Hence, after describing the day with cataclysmic and war imagery, God stressed, “I will bring distress on mankind ... because they have sinned against the LORD” (Zeph 1:17). He then went on to appropriate images of sacrifice to describe what he would do against his enemies: “Their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.... In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed” (Zeph 1:17–18; cf. Mal 2:3). Fire is prominent in numerous day of the Lord passages, and it aligns well with images of cataclysm, war, and sacrifice (e.g., Hos 8:14; Mic 1:7; Zeph 3:8; Mal 4:1[3:19]).⁸

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel compare Yahweh’s punishing of his enemies with a great sacrifice (Jer 46:10; Ezek 39:17, 20–21). Though less explicit, Zechariah also linked the imagery when he identified that Yahweh would, through a representative priestly ruler, “remove the wrong of this land in a single day” (Zech 3:9; cf. 6:12–13). The blood of a new covenant would be closely associated with him (Zech 9:9–11), and his representational death would save God’s people (Zech 14:7–9). Echoes of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 seem evident throughout.

The blended images of war and sacrifice depict the way that Yahweh justly secures atonement and re-establishes a state of right order wherein the redeemed celebrate him as supreme and value his image in others (cf. Isa 22:14; 34:2, 6). Such is the goal of the day of the Lord.

Near Yet Unexpected

OT statements regarding the day of the Lord are often unclear what elements of a vision report are for the immediate and what are for the consummate. Time

⁷ Cf. Jer 4:19; Ezek 7:14; Hos 5:8.

⁸ Cf. Isa 29:6; Joel 2:3, 5, 30; Amos 5:6; Obad 18; Mic 1:4; Nah 1:6; 3:15; Zeph 2:2.

clarifies, however, and initial, partial fulfillments establish the certainty that complete fulfillment is coming (cf. Jer 28:9; Ezek 33:33).

Many in OT Israel likely perceived each historical intrusion of divine wrath as potentially the consummate judgment of the ages (e.g., against Judah, Lam 2:21; or against Babylon, Isa 13:13, 19). However, in time the faithful recognized them as only foreshadows of the ultimate punishment and salvation (see Ezek 38:17; 39:8).⁹

The prophets commonly portrayed the day as “near and hastening fast” (Zeph 1:14).¹⁰ For the unrepentant living in darkness, the day would come like a thief, catching the victims unaware (Joel 2:9).¹¹ The call, therefore, was to remain spiritually alert (Joel 1:5). While God’s arrival was at times imminent only with respect to eternity and his timeline, the prophets’ point was that an immediate response is necessary. Only those who repent and seek the Lord in the present have any hope for shelter when the storms of wrath blow (Joel 2:14; Amos 5:15; Jon 3:9; Zeph 2:3; cf. Isa 33:14–16).

The Day of the Lord as Renewal

On the very day that Yahweh rises as judge of the earth, he promises not only to gather the nations to execute punishment but also to redeem a transformed multi-ethnic community of worshippers who will call upon his name (Zeph 3:8–10). On that very day, he will eradicate both sin and sinners from his presence while also ending curse, overcoming enemies, and creating a context where his faithful remnant will never fear retribution (Zeph 3:11–20). With God having pardoned their sins and counted them righteous (Isa 53:11; Jer 31:34), their fear and joy of God will be complete, and his joy in them will give rise to singing (Isa 65:19; Zeph 3:14, 17; Mal 4:2[3:20]).

Central to the day of Yahweh is the return of his presence among his people. “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.... But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (Mal 3:1–2). Joel clarifies that God will save and pour out his Spirit upon those who repent and

⁹ Cf. Jer 6:22–23; Rev 20:7–10.

¹⁰ Cf. Isa 13:6; Ezek 30:3; Joel 2:1; 3:14; Obad 15; Zeph 1:7.

¹¹ Cf. Jer 48:11–12; Amos 9:10; Mic 3:11; Zeph 1:12.

call on his name (Joel 2:11–13, 28–29).¹² In this day, God will fulfill his kingdom promises to David, causing all the earth to flourish under the new David’s rule (Isa 11:1–10; Ezek 37:24–28; Amos 9:11–14). Yahweh will be uniquely exalted as King, and all creation will both display and revel in his holiness (Zech 14:7–9, 20).

HOW DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SEE THE DAY OF THE LORD FULFILLED?

The Day of the Lord as Cataclysm, War, and Sacrifice

The NT draws on the OT images of cataclysm, war, and sacrifice when depicting the coming day of the Lord, which it often explicitly associates with Jesus’s second appearing. The apostles continue to stress the nearness of this day (Phil 4:5; Rev 1:3; 22:10), while also highlighting that God is faithful and that any sense of delay is due only to his patient desire to see more saved (2 Pet 3:8–9). For the unrepentant, the day of wrath will still be completely unexpected—coming like “a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2).¹³ But for those spiritually awake and living in the light, the day will not come as a surprise (1 Thess 5:4).¹⁴

All on the earth “will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt 24:30; cf. Acts 1:9–11). At that time “he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect” (Matt 24:31; cf. 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 8:7), separating the wheat from the chaff and burning the latter “with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:12; cf. 2 Thess 1:7–10; 2 Pet 3:7, 10). John envisioned that the results of this final war against evil would be a sacrificial feast for the birds: “Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great” (Rev 19:17–18).

The Day of the Lord as Already but Not Yet

In fulfillment of Malachi’s predictions (Mal 3:1–2; 4:5–6[3:23–24]), John the Baptist’s ministry prepared the way for Yahweh’s day of anger and his return to his

¹² Cf. Ezek 36:27; 37:14; Zeph 3:9.

¹³ Cf. Joel 2:9; Matt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:4; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15.

¹⁴ Cf. Matt 24:42–43; Mark 13:33–37; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 5:6; Rev 3:2–3.

temple (Matt 11:9–15). The Baptist anticipated that the day would include a fiery manifestation of divine fury that would distinguish the righteous from the wicked, and he saw Jesus as both the warrior and sacrifice through whom God would bring both destruction and deliverance (Matt 3:11–12; John 1:29). Also, with an eye toward the day of the Lord (Zeph 3:8), the prophet Zephaniah had proleptically urged the preserved “daughter of Zion” to rejoice, for “the King of Israel, the LORD” had removed their judgments and was reigning in their midst so that they never again needed to “fear” evil (Zeph 3:14–15). In John’s depiction of Jesus’s triumphal entry, he alludes to this text when he calls Jesus “the King of Israel” whose coming victory means the “daughter of Zion” should “fear not” (John 12:13, 15; cf. Zech 9:9).¹⁵ Furthermore, Zephaniah identified that new creational fruits like calling on Yahweh’s name and a multi-ethnic priesthood will grow up in the ashes following God’s sacrificial fires of wrath against the nations on his day (Zeph 3:8–10), and Luke described both Pentecost and the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch in ways that signal initial fulfilment of Zephaniah’s predictions (Acts 2:4, 21; 8:26–39).

All these realities suggest that the biblical authors saw Christ’s death and resurrection as signaling the dawn of the day of the Lord and, with it, the new creation. This is likely why each of the synoptic Gospels, building off imagery already associated with the messianic king in Psalm 18:7–15[8–16], emphasize the cataclysmic phenomena directly associated with Christ’s death (Matt 27:45, 51; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44). It may also clarify how Luke could see the Spirit’s work at Pentecost as fulfilling Joel’s prophecy about the day of the Lord while also highlighting that there would be numerous cosmological signs including darkness “before the day of the Lord comes” (Acts 2:16–21; cf. Joel 2:28–31).

At the cross God poured his end-time wrath out on Christ on behalf of the many that he would count as righteous (Isa 53:10–11). At the cross Jesus was judging the world, casting out its evil ruler, and drawing all people to himself (John 12:31–32). For us Jesus became sin and a curse (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13), and by his substitutionary sacrifice God cancelled “the record of debt that stood against us with

¹⁵ See Christopher S. Tachick, *“King of Israel” and “Do Not Fear, Daughter of Zion”: The Use of Zephaniah 3 in John 12*, Reformed Academic Dissertations 11 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

its legal demands,” thus disarming the rulers and authorities that could once accuse us (Col 2:14–15). We were once God’s enemies bound for destruction, but now, having been justified by Christ’s blood, we will “be saved from the wrath of God” that is still to come (Rom 5:9). At the cross, God initiated in the middle of history what the OT writers anticipated would happen at the end of history. And now believers are protected from the final day of fury because Christ has already borne the penalty anticipated at the day of the Lord (Rom 3:24; 5:1, 9–11).¹⁶

On the other hand, while we should see Christ’s death as the intrusion of the ultimate future day of the Lord into the middle of history, we must also recognize that the consummation of the day of the Lord is still to come. Paul said “concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him” that “the day of the Lord . . . will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (2 Thess 2:1–3; cf. Mark 13:7).

Elsewhere Jesus spoke of the future “day of judgment” wherein God would judge all people in accord with their deeds (Matt 12:36).¹⁷ He associated this day directly with his second coming (Matt 24:36, 42, 50; 25:13)¹⁸ and with the future resurrection (John 6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:24), which would be unexpected for all who are in darkness (Matt 24:43, 50; Luke 12:46; 17:30). At this time, Christ would gather all nations to himself and separate the wicked from the righteous (Matt 3:12; 25:31–32).¹⁹ He would punish the former with lasting fury (Matt 7:21–23; 25:41). However, he would welcome and feast with the latter (Matt 25:34; 26:29; Mark 14:25), and they would know him for who he is (John 14:20).

Paul stressed that “each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (1 Cor 3:13; cf. 2 Cor 5:10). He also said that those “who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus . . . will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed” (2 Thess 1:8–10). Similarly, Peter stressed that, for those in

¹⁶ Cf. Isa 53:5; 1 Pet 2:24.

¹⁷ Cf. Matt 7:23; 10:15; 11:22–24; John 12:48.

¹⁸ Cf. Mark 13:32; Luke 17:24.

¹⁹ Cf. Matt 13:24–30; Zeph 1:2; 3:8.

darkness, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” (2 Pet 3:10; cf. 1 Thess 5:2; Rev 3:3). John tagged the culminating battle of the ages “the great day of God the Almighty” (Rev 16:14) and “the great day of their wrath,” of which he queried, “Who can stand?” (Rev 6:17).

The period of overlap between an already day of the Lord and future day of the Lord is captured in Paul’s discussion of this day when he asserted that all believers are “children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.” He then continued, “Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet of the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:5, 8–9). At one level, Christians have already experienced and are already experiencing the day of the Lord, for “we have now been justified by [Christ’s] blood” and will “be saved by him from the wrath of God. . . . We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom 5:9–10). In Christ’s first coming, the day of the Lord intruded, and “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (Tit 2:11) and initiating the new creation. Nevertheless, we are still “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit 2:13; cf. Rom 8:18). Fulfilling OT hopes (Gen 3:15; Isa 66:8; Zech 3:9), Jesus restores the Sabbath by initiating kingdom rest and order that will only reach consummation when he returns (Matt 11:28–30; Heb 4:9, 11). As such, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. . . . And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:23–25).

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

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