

Do You Desire the Day of the Lord?

by David C. Grabbe
(Charlotte, North Carolina)

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Articles

Do You Desire the Day of the Lord?

by David C. Grabbe (Charlotte, North Carolina)

In II Peter 3:10, the apostle prophesies that "the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up." The Day of the Lord is a period of judgment just before Jesus Christ's return when He will judge in favor of some but against many more.

All but the most liberal mainstream Christians are looking forward to Christ's return. However, many have set their hopes on a fallacious rapture. They confidently watch the unfolding of end-time events because they believe that as things get worse, the time gets closer when they will ascend, victorious and unscathed, to meet Christ. Through the prophet Amos, God warns of a similar approach:

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! For what good is the day of the LORD to you? It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him! Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20)

The “New” Church of God Messenger
A Newsletter for the People of God
December 4, 2021 --- Issue No. 44
Special Edition

The Israelites of Amos’ time were like many in the Western world today. Those who at least nominally believed in God had fooled themselves into thinking that when He intervened, He would be on “their side.” Certainly, they were in a privileged position because of God’s covenant with them, not remembering that this relationship made them more accountable (Amos 3:2).

Over time, the Israelites had turned God’s promises to their fathers into a sort of divine favoritism, as though God had no choice but always to bless them no matter how they lived. Here in Amos 5, however, God pronounces a woe against them for this approach. They would not enjoy the fireworks from a safe distance; His judgment would overtake them, personally and painfully.



Mysterious Origins

There is a mystery in verse 18 about the phrase “the day of the LORD.” Amos mentions it as something Israel was already familiar with, not a new event he was foretelling. This mention is curious because Amos is one of the earliest recorded prophets, and none of the earlier ones—such as Moses or Elijah—refers to a “day of the LORD.” Isaiah, who does speak of the Day of the Lord by name (see Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; 34:8), did not come on the scene for another forty years, and Joel, with his dramatic imagery (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14), would not prophesy for nearly two hundred years. Yet, at this early date, Amos refers to the Day of the Lord as if it is already part of the national consciousness.

Perhaps one of the earlier prophets *had* spoken about the Day of the Lord, and we simply do not have a record of it. But another possibility fits the context. Even though what we call the Old Testament had not yet been canonized, the Israelites of Amos’ day still had Scriptures to draw upon to learn history and religion. The Pentateuch, some of the histories, and much of the wisdom literature were already available.

Significantly, they had the psalms, many of which are prophetic. None of the psalms use the specific phrase “the day of the LORD.” Still, the book contains enough mentions of God’s deliverance and protection during the day of trouble that a clear picture emerges of His future intervention and judgment.

In addition to prophetic psalms, the Israelites had psalms of praise for God’s mercy, watchfulness, and regard for His people. These inspired and encouraging psalms were among the songs they sang at their feasts. However, God declares in the very next verse: “I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies” (Amos 5:21). God does not use such words carelessly! The Israelites’ singing of His psalms did not impress Him because they mixed truth with debased practices. They felt good about themselves even as they mistreated others.

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Whatever the source of their concept of the Day of the Lord, the Israelites had concluded that God’s intervention would be spectacular—which was true. Yet, they willingly overlooked what God required of them and what it truly meant to be His people.

Delay in Justice

Psalm 50 begins with language befitting the Day of the Lord:

The Mighty One, God the LORD, has spoken and called the earth from the rising of the sun to its going down. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God will shine forth. Our God shall come and shall not keep silent; a fire shall devour before Him, and it shall be very tempestuous all around Him. (Psalm 50:1-3)

However, the psalm proceeds to expound on Israel’s deceitfulness, hypocrisy, and other sins:

But to the wicked God says: “What right have you to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you? When you saw a thief, you consented with him, and have been a partaker with adulterers. You give your mouth to evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son. These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you and set them in order before your eyes. (Psalm 50:16-21)

The Message, a paraphrase, renders the final verse as: “I kept a quiet patience while you did these things; you thought I went along with your game. I’m calling you on the carpet, now, laying your wickedness out in plain sight.” In other words, because the hammer had not yet fallen, the Israelites of old assumed that God did not care about what they were doing—but, as God declares, “. . . your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23).

Solomon speaks of this same tendency in Ecclesiastes 8:11. He observes that, because a delay in justice occurs, people conclude that crime and sin are not so terrible. This pause between cause and effect encourages them to continue in their evil.

God’s longsuffering is thus double-edged. For those who are serious about following God, His longsuffering gives them time to repent and change. But for those who are ambivalent about what God thinks, His delay of justice reinforces their wrong beliefs and behavior. In this vein, the Israelites mistook God’s silence for His approval, and as a result, the Day they thought would bring them glory instead delivered shame and defeat.

This pattern is evident in Israel’s history, and we can also see it happening in the Israelitish nations of today.

Distracted by Life

This principle has application for the church of God as well. Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:11-12 that the things that happened to Israel are examples for us, concluding, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” His words suggest that the footing of church members may not be as stable as they think.

The church of God stands outside of the mainstream because we deny the Doctrine of Eternal Security, among other things. Yet, even though we officially reject that heresy, we can live as though it is true—and never realize we are doing so. Without being conscious of our reasoning, we can behave as though God is somehow obligated to us, even as we pursue our own interests. We can treat God’s grace like an unlimited line of credit and push the Most High God into the background of our lives, kidding ourselves that we can get serious when we see trouble on the horizon.

The problem for us is not that God will violate His covenant—God forbid! The problem is that our walk of faith has peaks and valleys. We can be so focused on other things that we are not aware of a deteriorating condition that leads us to reject the covenant. Jesus takes great exception to essentially this condition in His letter to Laodicea:

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your

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nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent. (Revelation 3:15-19)

Revelation 1:10 states that the Day of the Lord is the setting for all of Christ’s letters to the churches. For Laodicea, Revelation 3:17 identifies the central issue: “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.” It would be a rare and foolish individual who would sincerely speak these words, so we should not understand the word “say” to mean they literally utter these words. The saying, “actions speak louder than words,” comes into play here. Thus, the conduct of the members’ lives proclaims that they feel no great need for anything else in their lives.

This portion of the church has one assessment about itself, while Christ’s evaluation could hardly be more different. The church holds up evidence of divine favor—riches of some sort—and concludes that it has “need of nothing.” Yet Christ’s verdict is that their condition is not only wretched but even more pitiable because they are not even aware of it.

Like the Israelites, the church members fundamentally and unknowingly disagree with God as to their spiritual condition, so His judgment comes as a shock. Their lives are pleasant, stimulating, and distracting enough that the Creator God does not meaningfully intrude into their thoughts all that often. So, they carry on, as though arm-in-arm with Him, even as they wander off the path. Like with the Israelites, God’s silence encourages them to believe that He approves.

This letter to the Laodiceans powerfully testifies that we can officially reject the Doctrine of Eternal Security but still live as though our salvation is a foregone conclusion. The simple fact is, we *can* fall away—and, materially speaking, we can feel as if we are living the “good life” all the while. The Laodiceans point to their abundance as evidence of how well they are doing, yet we should remember that even idol-worshippers and other pagans will come up with proof of their gods’ favor. Some practiced rituals like rain dances and fertility rites because they connected—incorrectly—those activities and a later good harvest and became confident of their gods’ blessing. God’s Word, however, urges us to consider our ways and not become settled because human nature tends to deceive itself.

Without Need

The word “need” in verse 17 is pivotal. We know that there are physical needs and spiritual ones. There are legitimate needs, and then there are wants, things we desire but can do without. But when there is a need—real or perceived—we take steps to fill it. If we need food or water, we will search them out. If we need money to put food on the table, we go to work, and so on. God created these needs in us, and we legitimately attend to them. If we look at what we spend our time, energy, or money on, we can discern what we believe our needs are. The greater we feel the need, the more we are willing to expend to meet that need.

Further, if we recognize that we have spiritual weakness, inconsistent faith, or besetting sin, we who are spiritual will drive ourselves to attend to the lack through what God provides, according to how significant we consider the need to be. But if we conclude we have God’s favor regardless of what we do, then we will not feel our spiritual needs as keenly, and we will focus on other things.

This letter, then, serves as another “woe” that the Day of the Lord “will be darkness, and not light,” for those who pay lip-service to God, who assume they have God’s favor because they cannot see any real need. Yet, when it comes to the final period of judgment, the letter to Philadelphia serves as a contrast. In Revelation 3:10, Jesus promises to keep them from the hour of trial, but He bases His deliverance on their perseverance, their endurance. Keeping commands and persevering do not fit into Israel’s self-pleasing religion, ancient or modern, but they are qualities of character that please God and which He will reward.

Regarding abundance, Matthew 5:45 says that God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust. In other words, God provides the conditions that allow anyone to prosper. Prosperity, therefore, can simply be evidence of God’s generosity and faithfulness to His promises. Prosperity *can* indicate His favor, but it is dangerous to take it as an absolute sign of God’s approval because too many examples speak to the contrary. Israel was quite wealthy before she fell, but her affluence resulted from God’s good and righteous nature, not from His rewarding her.

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In Isaiah 66:2, God says, “But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.” When it comes to protection, Psalm 34:7 says that “the Angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him and delivers them.” God defends those who fear Him. There was not much godly fear or trembling at God’s Word in Amos’ day, and the letter to Laodicea shows a similar lack of fear and trembling in at least part of the church during the Day of the Lord.

“Take Heed to Yourselves”

The Olivet Prophecy contains a similar warning:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34-36)

Christ warns His disciples, especially those at the end, that they need to take heed to themselves. We understand the spiritual danger of carousing and drunkenness, but even legitimate cares can become spiritual snares, depending on our approach. If our perceived needs revolve around material things, the Day of the Lord will come on us unexpectedly. It will be a day of darkness and not light because it will be a day of wrath on all the things that we cherish. We may find ourselves disagreeing with God’s judgment and siding with the world!

As part of this warning, Christ advises us to pray always. He is not saying that our every prayer should be to escape what lies ahead. Instead, it indicates that prayer is a means by which we become worthy. But we must clarify this, too, because we can pray by rote rather than desire—just punching the clock on our knees is not what makes us worthy. What makes us worthy through prayer is quality time spent with our Creator so that He changes us as we regularly come before Him. Through this relished contact, combined with plumbing the depths of His Word, we begin to think like Him, see things like Him, and live as He lives.

By watching ourselves and praying, we compare ourselves with the true Standard and become aware of our spiritual needs. Then we can begin to take steps to fill them. Because only Jesus Christ can truly fill each spiritual need, we must keep returning to Him in prayer. Along these lines, we must persevere through the strength He gives and not deceive ourselves that we are already at the finish line, victorious.

The verses following II Peter 3:10, where we began, reinforce these conclusions:

Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless. (II Peter 3:11-14)

Jesus Christ’s return broadly encapsulates our great hope. But as we eagerly anticipate it, God’s Word reminds us to consider ourselves in relation to what God desires of us because it is easy to make assumptions that will leave us unprepared.

During our time of judgment (I Peter 4:17), God is looking for things like poverty of spirit and contrition (Psalm 34:18; 51:17). He makes note of—and protects—those “who sigh and cry over all the abominations” (Ezekiel 9:4). He is watching out for those who tremble at His Word and conduct their lives in appropriate fear of Him. He responds to those who seek Him so He can change them. He requires conduct that is holy and godly. And He delights in children who are becoming without spot and blameless through surrendering their lives to Him. The Day of the Lord will still be terrifying, but for those with such character, it will at least end in salvation and glory.

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