

The Day Of The Lord

Well folks, it's all coming down to one day! When that day is over there will be joy and celebration in some quarters and the weeping and gnashing of teeth in others. One day can make a lot of difference. There have been other days that have made a lot of difference. November 22nd, 1963, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated made a lot of difference to those of us old enough to remember it. Everybody remembers what they were doing when that news broke. And of course 9/11 is a day that we will never forget. But there is a day that is more important than all of those other days put together, and that is what the Old Testament prophets referred to as "the day of the Lord." We heard about it today in our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Zephaniah, who said, "The day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly." Isaiah refers to "the day of the Lord" forty-five times in his prophecies, calling it a "great and terrible day" and describing it as "a cruel day of wrath and fierce anger...a day of vengeance, distress, rebuke and disgrace." Whew! Doesn't sound good, does it? Later prophets spoke of it as well. Joel said that it would be "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness...a dreadful day...when the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood." Echoing Joel, Amos asked the Israelites, "why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light—pitch dark, without a ray of brightness." Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, linked the day of the Lord together with the coming of Messiah, saying, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when He appears?" On the other hand, the same prophets prophesied that the day of the Lord would bring great blessings. Isaiah proclaimed that on that day, "...the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat...[and]...the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea...." Joel prophesied that on the day of the Lord, God would pour out his spirit on all people. Amos predicted that the day of the Lord would usher in a new paradise where, "the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes, and new wine will drip from the mountains." So which will it be? Blessings? Curses? Or both? Based upon their behavior, the Israelites had no right to expect anything but curses because they had continually disobeyed the Lord, the god of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. In spite of the objections of their prophets, Israelite kings had ignored the Mosaic Laws and turned to pagan religion, giving little thought to their own spiritual welfare or the spiritual welfare of the people they were supposed to lead. Even Solomon, who according to the Lord himself, was the wisest man who ever lived, even Solomon entered into military alliances and trade agreements with pagan nations, ratified them by taking pagan wives, and let them spread their religion throughout Israel—all of which was expressly forbidden by Mosaic Law. Other kings drained the national treasury by irresponsible spending and mortgaging the future of the nation. Religious feasts had become secular celebrations and worship had become mechanical—"just going through the motions." By Ezekiel's time, the priesthood had become so corrupt that the priests were

worshipping nature gods in the Jerusalem temple itself, while other Israelite were sacrificing their children to the Canaanite god Molech. The Israelites had become morally and spiritually decadent—to the point where according to Ezekiel their sins were even shocking to the pagans in the nations around them. God was enraged over the Israelites' moral and spiritual corruption, and he thundered: "I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood will be poured out like dust...." And so finally, the day of the Lord came, and it was everything the prophets had predicted. God's anger over Israel's sins and idolatry boiled over and his wrath struck the earth like lightning. But what no one expected was that the lightning didn't smite the Israelites who had provoked his wrath; instead it fell upon one man who been chosen to take all of God's wrath upon himself. He had come into this world to pay for all the sins of mankind by dying on a cross. And when that cross was raised up, like a lightning rod it drew all of God's wrath over sin down upon it. It struck the man on the cross like a million bolts of lightning and he suffered the torments of hell. And when he died, signs of the day of the Lord began to appear. Darkness came over the land. Earthquakes erupted. There was weeping and wailing. It was a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace—a cruel and dreadful day. But in God's mysterious plan, the terrible things that took place that day were cause for rejoicing. God had poured out all his wrath upon the man on the cross so that it wouldn't fall upon those who deserved it. But the lightning of his wrath unleashed a flood of his grace that fell like gentle rain upon people all over the earth. Just as their forefathers' sins had been atoned for through the Levitical sacrifices, all their sins were atoned for through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. Just as their forefathers had been reconciled to God through the blood of bulls and lambs and goats, they were reconciled to God through the blood of the man on the cross. Just as God's *chesed*—his loving-kindness—had redeemed and restored generations of their ancestors, his grace would now redeem and restore them and their descendants—all the sons and daughters of Abraham. And then came the greatest miracle of all: after the man on the cross had been buried, he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and offered eternal life to all who would follow him. So did Israel rejoice? Did they flock to the arms of the risen and ascended Son of God who had taken away all their sins and now offered them eternal life? Well, no. Some did, but most did not—and still do not. Such is the hardness of human hearts. But those who did follow him became a light to the rest of the world, and that light drew multitudes to him from all nations. This was all part of God's plan.

And now, all of us who follow the man on the cross look forward to another day of the Lord. Like the first day of the Lord, it will bring both blessings and curses. The curses—the terrible things that will come to pass on the next day of the lord are almost beyond our comprehension. The roaring of the sea will be so great that men will faint from terror.

Floods, tsunamis, hurricanes and tornadoes will ravage the face of the earth. People will do horrible things to each other. People will die gnawing their tongues in agony and cursing God. The horror will be so great that men will crawl into caves and beg the mountains to fall upon them rather than face God's wrath. But for those who have followed the man on the cross it will be a day of rejoicing. As Jesus told us, "when you see all these signs taking place, lift up your heads, because your salvation is drawing near." Well, we've seen all the signs and they tell us that the second great and dreadful day of the Lord is coming quickly. But sometimes it's hard to believe, isn't it? After all, nearly two thousand years have passed since the promise was given. Where is the man on the cross? Or, as scoffers like to say, "where is this 'coming' he promised?" Well, listen to the words of Peter: "...do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The delay is due to God's love: he draws time out so that all people might have a chance to repent and come to knowledge of the truth and be saved. He stays the harvest so that he can bring the full number of souls into His grainary. But there are those who misconstrue the love of God and turn His patience and forbearance into evidence of His indifference or non-existence. So hard are their hearts; so blind are their eyes; so deaf are their ears. "But remember," Peter adds, "the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." God's judgment is a scorched earth policy, and all who have rejected the man on the cross will be swept away before it. One way in which we experience a small dose of what that will be like is when we are faced with the unexpected death of someone we love. Death is a calamity, and its indifference to our feelings and our plans is brutal. But for all its cruelty, death does force us to confront something that we are all too inclined to ignore: that there has to be a day of accounting—a day of the Lord. We have spent our lives accumulating a massive debt—the debt for all our sins with which we have offended God and provoked His wrath. And that debt has to be paid—either by us or by the man on the cross. So who will pay your debt? Most of the people of Israel in Zephaniah's time denied that they had any such debt. They found out that they were wrong. Most of the people of our age are following in their footsteps. They too will find out that they were wrong. What about you? Do you trust the man on the cross who died to pay the debt for your sins and then rose again to give you eternal life? If so, the day of the Lord will be a day of unimaginable joy for you. If not, it will be a very different kind of day. Amen

