

The Word of Righteousness

The Government of God and the Day of the Lord (2)

In the previous issue we considered the government of God as revealed in the day of the Lord (1 Thes. 5:2; 2 Thes. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:10-12), the day of God's final governmental dealings with Israel, the New Testament believers, and the nations of the earth. As we noted before, God's judgment began from the angels in the ancient times and passed through the generations of man in the Old Testament (2:4-9). In the New Testament age it begins from the house of God (1 Pet. 1:17; 2:23; 4:6, 17) and continues until the coming of the day of the Lord, which will be a day of judgment on the Jews, the believers, and the Gentiles. After the millennium, all the dead, including men and demons, will be judged and will perish (v. 5; 2 Pet. 3:7), and the heavens and the earth will be consumed by fire, completing the day of the Lord's judgment. In this way, God will clear up the whole earth and even the whole universe to produce the new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness dwells (v. 13). Thus, a proper understanding of the day of the Lord is necessary to know the role, disposition, and destiny of the believers at the time of the Lord's return, particularly with respect to the rapture, the great tribulation, and the coming kingdom age.

Misunderstandings concerning the day of the Lord have contributed in particular to the two extreme views of the rapture of the saints—the pretribulation school, which teaches that the entire church will be raptured at the secret coming of Christ prior to the great tribulation, and the posttribulation school, which asserts that the church will be raptured at the open coming of Christ at the end of the tribulation. Both of these views annul and confuse the many warnings to the believers related to that day and instill a false sense of security that is contrary to the revelation of the Scriptures. In this article we will consider further details concerning the day of the Lord in order to better see how the believers will participate in the government of God at the end of this age.

The Work of Christ in His Second Coming

The second coming of Christ involves a number of crucial items related to the fulfillment of God's eternal economy. In the stage of His incarnation, Jesus said, "My Father is working until now, and I also am working" (John 5:17). In this principle, Christ's work began from the creation of

the heavens and the earth (Col. 1:16) and will continue even into eternity. Watchman Nee writes,

Since the rebellion of Satan and the fall of man, God has been working until now, and the Lord is also working...His work will go on until the kingdom and even until the new heaven and the new earth. God is always advancing; He never stops. (37:121-122)

In the New Testament Christ's work began with His incarnation, in which He brought the infinite God into the finite man, uniting and mingling the Triune God with the tripartite man (John 1:1, 14; Lee, Co-worker 7-8). In His human living, He lived a God-man life to declare God, living not by His own sinless life but by the life of the Father in order to express in His humanity the bountiful God in His rich attributes through His aromatic virtues by which He attracted and captivated people (John 1:18; 6:57; 10:30; 14:9-10; Matt. 4:18-20). In His earthly ministry He also overcame the enemy, Satan, and sowed the seed of the kingdom by preaching the gospel, teaching the truth, healing sicknesses, and casting out demons (John 14:30; Matt. 13:3, 37). In His crucifixion He accomplished His all-inclusive judicial redemption, terminating all things of the old creation, redeeming all the things created by God and fallen in sin, creating the new man with His divine element, and releasing His divine life from the shell of His humanity (Rom. 3:24; Col. 1:20; Eph. 2:15; John 12:24).

In His resurrection Christ was begotten to be the firstborn Son of God, was transfigured to be the life-giving Spirit, and regenerated the believers for His Body (Acts 13:33; 1 Cor. 15:45; 1 Pet. 1:3). In His ascension and heavenly ministry Christ sent forth the Holy Spirit upon the believers economically for His propagation to produce the church. In the heavens today He is the Ruler of the kings of the earth, ruling over the entire earth that the gospel may be spread and the churches may be established, and He is the Lion-Lamb opening the scroll of God's economy (Rev. 1:5; 5:5). He is also the anointed Christ, the transcending and transmitting Head, the interceding High Priest, and the heavenly Minister (Acts 1:5, 8; 2:36; Eph. 1:22; Heb. 7:25-26; 8:2). As such a One in the heavens, Christ is dispensing Himself as the heavenly element to be our daily salvation and moment-by-moment supply so that He may intensify His organic salvation, produce the

overcomers, and build up the Body of Christ to consummate the New Jerusalem (Rev. 5:6; 2:7; 21:2).

Before Christ's coming at the end of the present age, His work for the fulfillment of God's economy will be ongoing. Christ will continue to work by reaping the firstfruits, those of God's crop who mature the earliest and who are reaped for His satisfaction (14:1-5). According to the sequence of Revelation 14, this will transpire before the three and a half years of the great tribulation. Near the end of the tribulation, Christ will also reap the general harvest, catching up the majority of the saints to meet Him in the air (vv. 14-16; 1 Thes. 4:16-17). Following this, He will judge all the raptured and resurrected saints at His judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10), not related to their eternal salvation but related to their receiving of a dispensational reward or punishment. Then He will marry the overcoming saints and return with them to defeat Antichrist and his rebellious armies (Rev. 19:7-9, 11-16). About this time Christ will also gather and save all the tribes of Israel (Matt. 24:30-31; Rom. 11:26), and He will judge the living, Gentile unbelievers at the throne of His glory (Matt. 25:31-46).

Following this, Christ will establish His kingdom and will rule with His overcomers as co-kings over all the nations (Rev. 20:4, 6; 3:21).

Such a reigning will be the unique work of Christ in the millennium to show, for one thousand years, to the entire universe His kingship with His divine and heavenly authority for the shame of Satan, the defeated enemy of God, who will then be bound and imprisoned in the abyss, the bottomless pit (Rev. 20:2-3). (Lee, *Conclusion* 845)

After the millennium Christ will do the work of judging all the dead, including men and demons, and He will cast Satan, death, and Hades into the lake of fire (Acts 10:42; Rev. 20:10-15). Then in eternity He, as the redeeming God, will administrate within the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and the new earth, He will shine over the nations as the lamp of the holy city with God as the light, and He will nourish the sons of God as the components of the New Jerusalem and heal the nations as the peoples of God on the new earth (21:23-24; 22:1-3).

On earth today there are three categories of people: the believers as components of the church, Israel as God's chosen people, and the Gentiles. At His coming back, the Lord will deal with all three categories. First, He will take

up the overcoming believers and later catch up the majority of the saints, and He will judge them at His judgment seat, selecting those who will be in His wedding feast and be His army. Then He will gather and save the scattered Jews, and after He sets up His throne in Jerusalem, He will judge all those who remain from the nations. In this way Christ in His work at His coming back will deal with the believers, the Jews, and the Gentiles. All the foregoing judgments and dealings will transpire in the day of the Lord. By this we can see that Christ's work at that time will constitute a major part of the fulfillment of God's economy for His eternal purpose.

The Extent of the Day of the Lord

Some of the confusion concerning the day of the Lord and the events that pertain to the believers at the end of this age can be avoided by an accurate understanding of the extent, or span, of that day. By comparing the many verses that refer to the day of the Lord, we can see that it is not a single day but a period of time. Before the Lord comes, the present age is "man's day," in which man judges until the Lord comes (1 Cor. 4:3-5). Then, it will be the day of the Lord, the greater part of which will be the coming age, the kingdom age, in which all judgment will be the Lord's. This day will begin with the Lord's parousia, His presence (Matt. 24:3), with all its judgments and will end with the judgment upon men and the demons at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15; Recovery Version, 2 Pet. 3:12, note 3). The Lord's parousia will begin when the overcoming saints are raptured to the throne of God in the heavens just before the great tribulation (Rev. 12:5-6; 14:1).

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Shortly after this, the day of the Lord will be accompanied by signs in the heavens and on earth. Joel 2:30-31 says, "I will show wonders in the heavens and on earth: / Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. / The sun shall be turned into darkness, / And the moon into blood, / Before the great and terrible / Day of Jehovah comes." These signs are repeated in Revelation 6:12: "I saw when He opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black like sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood." The sun becoming black and the moon becoming like blood correspond to Joel 2:31, which speaks of the great and terrible day of Jehovah, which in the New Testament is called the day of the Lord, mainly in the sense of judgment for governmental dealing. The purpose of the supernatural calamities of

the sixth seal will be to smite the earth with the things on it and the heavens with their heavenly bodies (Rev. 6:12-17; 8:7-12).¹

The seventh seal, which begins to be opened in Revelation 8, comprises the seven trumpets (vv. 1-2). Verse 7 says, “The first trumpeted, and there was hail and fire mingled with blood, and it was cast to the earth; and the third part of the earth was burned up, and the third part of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.” Verse 8 speaks further of fire and blood, and verse 12 of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Again, this corresponds to the blood, fire, sun, and moon in Joel 2:30-31, indicating that the day of the Lord will begin around the time of the sixth seal, with the first four trumpets of the seventh seal, as a prelude to the great tribulation. (The fifth through seventh trumpets, as the three woes, are the major structure of the tribulation—Rev. 8:13.) At that time, men will hide themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains and say to them, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?” (6:15-17). According to all the foregoing, the day of the Lord begins near the commencement of the tribulation and must therefore span the entire three and a half years of its duration.

Second Peter 3:10 says, “The day of the Lord will come as a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the elements, burning with intense heat, will be dissolved, and the earth and the works in it will be burned up.” The day of the Lord includes not only the aspect of Christ’s coming as a thief but also the burning of the heavens and the earth. *Come as a thief* refers to Christ’s premillennial coming for judgment, and *burning* indicates the completion of His judgment of the universe at the end of the millennium. Verse 12 continues, “Expecting and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens, being on fire, will be dissolved, and the elements, burning with intense heat, are to be melted away.” On account of the coming of the day of God’s judgment upon every part of the old creation, the heavens will no longer be able to stand and remain as they have been, but will be dissolved, their elements melting away in the intense heat of the burning fire. This will transpire at the end of the millennium, when earth and heaven will flee away from the One on the great white throne of His final judgment (Rev. 20:11).

Concerning this judgment, John N. Darby concurs, “This will not be at the commencement of the day, but at its close; and here we are free to reckon this day, according to the apostle’s word, as a thousand years, or whatever length of period the Lord shall see fit” (*Synopsis* 420). Thus, the day of the Lord will be the time of His punishing judgments and governmental dealings upon the

heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, men, Satan, the fallen angels, and the demons to clear up the entire universe for the coming of the new heaven and new earth for His eternal kingdom. It will begin near the time of the sixth seal at the commencement of the great tribulation and will last until the final judgment of the heavens and the earth. The time from the sixth seal to the beginning of the thousand-year kingdom will be a little more than three and a half years, the main part of which will be the great tribulation. The judgment at the great white throne will take place after the millennium. Thus, the day of the Lord will last for about one thousand three and a half years (Recovery Version, Joel 1:15, note 1).

Warnings and Exhortations concerning the Day of the Lord

In this and the sections following, we shall examine some major passages in the New Testament concerning the day of the Lord. The first is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. In chapter 4 Paul speaks of being caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air (vv.15-17). This is the rapture of the believers at the last trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52; Rev. 11:15). Here, Paul mentions the rapture in a general way, as a word of comfort. Details concerning this matter are revealed elsewhere in the New Testament.² Following this, in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3 he says,

But concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need for anything to be written to you; for you yourselves know perfectly well that like a thief in the night, so the day of the Lord comes. When they say, Peace and security, then sudden destruction comes upon them, just as birth pangs to a woman with child; and they shall by no means escape.

But (δέ) in verse 1 indicates a transition from the focus of chapter 4 in order to show a different view of the matters spoken of there.³ In chapter 4 the coming of the Lord is mainly for comfort and encouragement, but in chapter 5 the day of the Lord is mainly for warning. Near the time of the Lord’s coming, the rebellion of men against God under Satan’s instigation will intensify. Because of this, sudden destruction will come upon them from God (Isa. 13:6-8). This destruction will commence with the day of the Lord. The proclamation of “peace and security” in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 must point to the time of perceived peace prior to Antichrist’s breaking of the covenant with Israel and the subsequent events of the great tribulation. Therefore, the time Paul speaks of must be just before the tribulation of three and a half years. This suits the phrase *like a thief in the night* (v. 2). It is when the present, dark age becomes like the days of Noah that Christ will come with a flood of destruction. It is against that time that the believers are warned to be watchful and ready in the light of His coming as a thief (Matt. 24:37-39, 43).

Rather than provide details about the timing of the rapture or other eschatological events,⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 emphasizes the suddenness and terror of the day of the Lord and the believers' need to watch, be sober, and fight the spiritual warfare so as not to be surprised and overtaken by it. Verse 8 exhorts the believers to be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and a helmet, the hope of salvation. Concerning these armaments, Henry Alford says,

This not only in being awake and sober, but in being *armed*—not only watchful, but as sentinels, on our guard, and *guarded* ourselves. Notice, that these arms are defensive only, as against a sudden attack—and belong therefore not so much to the Christian's conflict with evil, as (from the context) to his guard against being surprised by the day of the Lord as a thief in the night. (278)

Verses 4 and 5 are further words of incentive to the believers: “But you, brothers, are not in darkness that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.” In these verses *light*, *day*, *night*, and *darkness* all are without articles, denoting spiritual principles or conditions. Alford notes that *sons of light* and *sons of the day* are Hebraisms, “signifying that we *belong to*, having our origin from, the light and the day” (277).⁵ Verses 6 to 8 continue,

So then let us not sleep, as the rest do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep during the night, and those who get drunk are drunk during the night; but since we are of the day, let us be sober.

So then turns the thought from Paul's encouragement to the believers' responsibility, bringing out the true purpose of this passage. The verb forms *let us not sleep* (μὴ καθεύδωμεν) and *let us watch and be sober* (γρηγορῶμεν καὶ νήφωμεν) in verse 6 and again *let us be sober* (νήφωμεν) in verse 8 are first person plural, present active subjunctive (the “hortative subjunctive”), denoting an exhortation to repeated or continual action with an element of contingency. Since by position and nature we, the believers, are sons of the day, we must exercise to not sleep but to watch and be sober.

Paul's exhortation here is similar to that in Ephesians 5:8, which says, “You were once darkness but are now light in the Lord; walk as children of light.” Verse 15 elaborates,

“Look therefore carefully how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise.” In these verses, as well as in 1 Thessalonians 5, the believers' status as sons of the day and children of light is distinguished from the practical walk of their life and service. To walk practically and demonstrably as children of light is not a taken-for-granted entitlement to all believers, for such an entitlement would not require circumspection (“look therefore carefully”). Rather, it is the issue of a careful looking and exercise with regard to the proper living of the church and the responsibility that it should bear in the Spirit.

A Call to Watchfulness and Sobriety

The purpose of Paul's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5 is to call the Thessalonians to a walk of watchfulness and sobriety in the light of the day of the Lord. However, many contemporary teachings of the rapture undermine

this purpose and strip this passage of its urgency. Verse 9 says, “God did not appoint us to wrath but to the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Based on this, Walvoord summarizes verses 1 to 11 as follows:

Taken as a whole, the pretribulational point of view gives sense and meaning to 1 Thessalonians 5 and explains why this is introduced after the rapture [in chapter 4]. In effect, Paul is saying that the time of the rapture cannot be determined any more than the time of the beginning of the day of the Lord, but this is of *no concern to the believers* because our appointment is not the wrath of the day of the Lord, but rather the salvation which is ours in

Christ. (*Tribulation* 118, emphasis added)

It is hard to see how Walvoord's conclusion gives sense and meaning to chapter 5. In verse 2 Paul tells the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night; verse 3 speaks of the attendant destruction of rebellious men; verses 4 and 5 remind the Thessalonians of their intrinsic nature as sons of light and sons of the day; and in verses 6 to 8 they are exhorted to be watchful, to be sober, and to fight the spiritual battle. Finally, in verses 9 to 11 Paul gives a word of comfort and encouragement, the effect of which (according to Walvoord) is to inform the believers that the matters he has just spoken of are of no concern to them. This is contrary to the construction of the verses in question. As we have seen, so then in verse 6 is a transition from Paul's word of comfort in verses 4 and 5 to an exhortation to watchfulness in the following verses. Then verses 8 and 9 say, “But since we are of the day,

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let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath but to the obtaining of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

For (ὅτι) at the beginning of verse 9 indicates that what is revealed in this verse is the reason for the exhortations in the preceding verses; that is, God’s appointment of the believers not to wrath but to salvation is the cause, impetus, and ground upon which the foregoing exhortations are given. Rather than taking verse 9 as a guaranteed exemption from judgment at the Lord’s coming, we must receive it as a strong motivation to watch, be sober, and fight to cooperate with God in order that we may obtain His salvation through the Lord Jesus. This recalls Paul’s word in Philippians 3:12-14:

Not that I have already obtained or am already perfected, but I pursue, if even I may lay hold of that for which I also have been laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brothers, I do not account of myself to have laid hold; but one thing I do: Forgetting the things which are behind and stretching forward to the things which are before, I pursue toward the goal for the prize to which God in Christ Jesus has called me upward.

Although Paul had been laid hold of by Christ Jesus, he still pursued to lay hold of Him. Although God had called Paul to the goal and the prize, Paul did not consider his participation in the heavenly calling to be a thing accomplished but rather pressed toward the goal by running the race to obtain the prize and reach maturity. The Lord died for us (1 Thes. 5:10) not only that we may be saved from eternal perdition but also that we may live together with Him through His resurrection, which living is able to save us from the coming destruction. This is the meaning of Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians, a matter which is of great concern to the believers.

Being Sober and Walking as Sons of Light

Verse 7 says, “Those who sleep, sleep during the night, and those who get drunk are drunk during the night.” Some have claimed that *those*, in the third person, refers only to unbelievers, as opposed to *we* and *us* in the following verse (Stanton 89). However, in verse 8 Paul does not say, “We are sober,” but, “Let us be sober.” If we as believers are exempt from spiritual sleep and drunkenness, if sobriety were the default and persistent condition of all believers, Paul would not have needed to exhort the Thessalonians to soberness. Rather, to maintain our sobriety in the midst of a drunken and befuddled generation requires diligence and the exercise of our spirit, which is mingled with the Lord and one with Him (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:16; 1 Cor. 6:17).

Paul’s exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 5 indicates that being a son of light (in nature) and a son of the day (also in nature) is not an *a priori* guarantee of a life of walking in the light in practicality. There is still the need of the exercise of a watchful and sober living, manner, and attitude. The contingency implied in Paul’s use of the hortative subjunctive (“not sleep...watch...be sober,” vv. 6, 8) is that a believer, although possessing the status of a son of light and a membership in the class of sons of light, may still behave as one in the night. This is the lesson taught by the Lord in Matthew 24:45-51, in which one of His slaves—appointed by the Lord, calling Him “my master,” and believing in His coming—may still fall into drunkenness.

Paul’s tone of high approval toward the Thessalonians expresses his confidence that these simple, suffering, and faithful believers were maintaining their stance as sons of light. His words of comfort to this young church are based on the approved status of their work of faith, labor of love, and endurance of hope in the Lord (1 Thes. 1:3). Thus, his mood toward them is typically one of comfort (5:11). However, Paul’s tone toward the Corinthians, for example, is not the same. He asks them, “What partnership do righteousness and lawlessness have? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). Again, if the Corinthian believers had been walking in the light as sons of light, there would have been no need for this word of rebuke and adjustment. Rather, by this word Paul calls the Corinthians out of the darkness into which they had lapsed. From this we may conclude that to walk in the light as sons of the day is not the universal experience, practically speaking, of all Christians. Those who live and walk as sons of the day will not be snared by the coming of the Lord and the subsequent day of judgment, but to those who live in the stupor, drunkenness, and befuddlement of the present dark age, the Lord will come upon them unawares, as He said to the church in Sardis, “If therefore you will not watch, I will come as a thief, and you shall by no means know at what hour I will come upon you” (Rev. 3:3).

To claim that those who “sleep” and “get drunk” are only unbelievers is to strip every element of warning for the believers from 1 Thessalonians 5. Cyrus I. Scofield says appropriately,

There is a shallow and senseless optimism which is not less unworthy the Christian than the gloomiest pessimism. To refuse to take due account of serious and menacing perils; to deliberately close the ears to the warnings of the sure word of prophecy; to say “peace and safety,” when sudden destruction is impending over a guilty world, is worse than childish—it is criminal. And there is very much of that shallow and thoughtless optimism in the pulpit and religious press of our day.⁶ (*Addresses* 89)

The exemption of every genuine believer from the judgments of the day of the Lord is no more assured than that every believer—in a living, practical, and manifest way—walks in the light as a child of light, has no part in darkness of any kind, cooperates with the Lord, grows in the divine life unto maturity, labors to bear fruit in the Lord, and lives, walks, and works according to the spirit, which is joined to the divine Spirit as one (Rom. 8:4; 1 Cor. 6:17). To ignore or dilute the scriptural warnings concerning the day of the Lord, to say that it is of no concern to believers, and to indiscriminately claim exemption from all future judgment is a shallow cry of “peace and security” that dulls the senses of the believers and puts them into a stupor, a kind of drunkenness, the very thing against which Paul warns the Thessalonians.

The Rapture of the Saints in the Day of the Lord

Another significant passage concerning the day of the Lord is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. The New Testament repeatedly refers to the Lord’s open, manifest coming in power and great glory (Matt. 16:27; 24:27, 30; 2 Thes. 2:8; Jude 14-15; Rev. 1:7). Second Thessalonians 2, in particular, relates Christ’s open coming to the rapture of the saints, the believers who are alive and remain on the earth at the end of the New Testament age. Verses 1 to 3 say,

Now we ask you, brothers, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you be not quickly shaken in mind nor alarmed, neither by a spirit nor by word nor by a letter as if by us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way, because it will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition.

This passage makes clear that the day of the Lord must be preceded by two definite, outward signs, or events. The first is that “the apostasy” must take place. No further details are given as to the nature of this apostasy, but it must be a particular and notable falling away from the straight way of God’s economy, as revealed in the Scriptures, that will take place near the end of this age. The second event is that the man of lawlessness, Antichrist, must be revealed. According to the prophecy in Daniel 9:27, the latter event will take place in the middle of the seventieth week, the last seven years of this age, which midpoint will mark the beginning of the great tribulation of three and a half years (Rev. 11:2; 12:6; 13:5).

Second Thessalonians 2:8 continues by saying, “The lawless one will be revealed (whom the Lord Jesus will slay by the breath of His mouth and bring to nothing by the manifestation of His coming).” The manifestation of the Lord’s coming will be the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of His power, in flaming fire (1:7), which will take place at the end of the tribulation. Thus, Paul introduces his word of adjustment to the Thessalonians by speaking of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2:1) and then goes on to cover matters that will take place both during and at the end of the tribulation. This closely ties the rapture of the saints with the day of the Lord, providing a strong ground to conclude that at least a certain number of believers will not be raptured, gathered together to the Lord, until Christ’s coming in power at the end of the great tribulation.

The exemption of every genuine believer from the judgments of the day of the Lord is no more assured than that every believer walks in the light as a child of light, has no part in darkness of any kind, cooperates with the Lord, grows in the divine life unto maturity, labors to bear fruit in the Lord, and lives, walks, and works according to the spirit.

Teachers of dispensationalism respond to this clear association of the rapture with the day of the Lord by an argument based on verses 6 and 7. These verses say, “Now you know that which restrains, so that he might be revealed in his own time. For it is the mystery of lawlessness that is now operating, but only until the one now restraining goes out of the way.”⁷ *That which restrains* refers to some power that at present hinders the revelation of the man of lawlessness. According to God’s sovereignty, this restraining factor will not be removed until the end of this age, at which time Antichrist will be revealed. Dispensational teachers claim that the restraining power is the Holy Spirit Himself, who will be removed from the earth as if by rap-

ture. At this point, Gerald Stanton claims, “The Holy Spirit of God will no longer be resident in the earthly sphere...The Spirit will minister from heaven as during the Old Testament economy. He will be present, but not resident; operating, but no longer indwelling” (102, 105); or as William Kelly states it, the Holy Spirit as the Restrainer “will be then and there clean gone...He goes of Himself, and quits the scene” (“Coming” 99).

According to the foregoing argument, if the Spirit departs before the manifestation of Antichrist, so must the church. “How manifestly impossible,” Stanton says, “for the Church to go into the Tribulation once the Spirit has been caught away from the earth” (101). This argument is obscure and full of assumptions. It is mere presumption to claim with assurance that the restraining factor in verses 6 and 7 is the Holy Spirit, and it is further presumption to claim that “goes out of the way” points to

the removal of the Spirit from the earth, and with Him the church. Yet this obscure interpretation remains the bulwark and stronghold of dispensational teaching, which seeks to paint over the clear picture presented in verses 1 to 4. The clear conclusion of 2 Thessalonians 2 is that it was normal to the apostolic thought to bind together the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, our gathering together to Him, and the day of the Lord, indicating that at least some of the believers will not be raptured until the manifestation of Christ's coming in power.

A Balanced View of the Day of the Lord

That Stanton claims that 2 Thessalonians 2 "adds a considerable weight of evidence" to the pretribulation view of the rapture (107) is a testimony to the presumptions required to maintain the dispensational argument. This passage is more effectively used by advocates of the post-tribulation school of the rapture, who teach that the day of the Lord is that day in which Christ will openly appear to the world, rapture the saints to the air, and immediately return with them to destroy Antichrist and defeat the enemies gathered against Him at Armageddon. Alexander Reese, a leading proponent of this view, summarizes and interprets Paul's message to the Thessalonians as follows:

Beginning to exhort them touching the *Coming* of the Lord, he proceeds to speak of the *Day* of the Lord...It is a convincing proof that the two things were synchronous in Paul's mind, and not separated by a period of years as the [pretribulation] theorists assert. (178)

According to Reese's timeline, it is a contradiction and an absurdity to teach that the Lord's coming, and the attendant rapture of the church, might precede the coming of Antichrist:

More damaging still is the consideration that, on the new [pretribulation] view, the glorious Day of *Messiah*, which is a principal theme of O. T. prophecy, is to be succeeded by *the rise and reign of the Man of Sin* and the deepest degradation that Israel has every known...These new innovators...want us to believe that this King's glorious *Day*, the Day of days of the King of kings, is going to be followed by Antichrist's triumph and Reign, not His own. (182)

However, whatever amount of truth is in Reese's arguments, his view, like that of dispensationalism, ultimately fails in that it does not embrace the twofoldness of divine truth. According to the revelation of the entire New Testament, the coming of the Lord has two aspects in time. Matthew 24:37-39 says,

For just as the days of Noah were, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as they were in those days before

the flood, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day in which Noah entered into the ark, and they did not know that judgment was coming until the flood came and took all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

"Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" in the days before the flood corresponds to "peace and security" before the sudden destruction of the day of the Lord (1 Thes. 5:3), that is, the apparent peace just prior to the great tribulation. It is at this point that Christ will come in secret as a thief to steal away the precious and watchful believers, the living overcomers, in an early rapture. Matthew 24:40-44 continues,

At that time two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord comes. But know this, that if the householder had known in which watch the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also be ready, because at an hour when you do not expect it, the Son of Man is coming.

This secret coming of the Lord takes place before both the manifestation of Antichrist and the judgments of the day of the Lord. On the other hand, verses 27 through 30 say,

For just as the lightning comes forth from the east and shines to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be...And immediately after the tribulation of those days,...the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

This open coming of the Lord will transpire at the end of the tribulation. At this time, He will rapture the majority of the believers, who will have passed through the greater part of the tribulation (Rev. 14:14-16), He will deliver, gather, and restore the remnant of Israel, and He will destroy Antichrist and his armies at Armageddon. Thus, Christ's coming at the end of this age will be in two phases, one before the tribulation (as a thief) and one at the end of the tribulation (with power and great glory). Therefore, it is not balanced to conclude, as Reese does, that since the gathering of the saints in rapture is related to the day of the Lord, all believers must remain on the earth until the end of the tribulation. The truth of the Bible, especially as revealed in Matthew and Revelation, is that Christ will come as a thief prior to the judgments of His day to steal away the believers who are watchful, sober, and ready. Those who have not been watching against that day will remain on the earth during the tribulation, and they will be raptured only at the coming of the

Lord in power and glory. This is the faithful word of righteousness in the New Testament.

The Day of the Lord and the Day of Christ

Dispensational eschatology takes as its governing principle the distinction between the church and the Jews at the end of this age.⁸ This teaching maintains that the distinction between the two peoples of God must be so sharply maintained that the interpretation of prophetic Scripture must always take into account that God cannot work with the two peoples simultaneously. Since, for example, the great tribulation is known in the Old Testament as a time of distress for Jacob (i.e., Israel—Jer. 30:7), dispensationalism forbids that the church of the New Testament age be on earth during that time; “Jacob” and the church cannot both be there. Thus, before God begins to turn the Jews back to Himself near the end of this age, the church of necessity must have already been removed from the earth by rapture. This is the primary motivation for fixing the time of the rapture of the believers before the commencement of the tribulation. This is an unmovable pillar of dispensationalism and the source of its fundamental error in eschatology. As a consequence of this teaching, it is asserted that New Testament believers have no part in the coming day of the Lord. Darby says, “Now the day of the Lord is constantly used for a time of trial and trouble, from which the coming of the Lord and our gathering together to Him is to exempt us. The day will not come on us unawares: we are of it” (*Writings* 8:190).

The New Testament speaks of the day of the Lord by several names, including the day of Christ (Phil. 1:10; 2:16), the day of Christ Jesus (1:6), the day of our Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 1:14), and the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:8). A corollary of the basic error of dispensationalism is that the day of the Lord (also called the day of God—2 Pet. 3:12) is distinct from the day of Christ or any of its other foregoing names, not only in terminology but in fact, content, and timing. As the most thorough and lucid advocate of dispensational eschatology in recent decades, Gerald Stanton states this position as follows: “The Day of the Lord in Scripture is always associated with the wrath and judgment of God, while the Day of Christ is distinguished by the fact that it is universally spoken of as a time of blessing” (71).⁹ This conclusion is based on the obvious difference in tone and flavor between, for example, “The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable *day of the Lord* comes” (Acts

2:20) and, “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun in you a good work will complete it until the *day of Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 1:6, emphasis added).

The day of Christ Jesus, Stanton says, “is a day of glad anticipation and is in contrast at almost every point with the Day of the Lord, which is a day of wrath and darkness and judgment” (72). However, this observation is carried to an extreme: Since the day of Christ will manifest the work of grace upon the believers, and the day of the Lord will bring judgment, the saints will be raptured on the day of Christ before the day of the Lord ever comes. The advantage of this conclusion to the dispensational school is that the Scriptures may speak of the believers in the day of Christ and of judgment in the day of the Lord without contradicting the pretribulation rapture. This, the basic premise of dispensational eschatology, is an example of what Watchman Nee calls the “presumptions and assumptions” required to maintain the thesis of the pretribulation rapture as taught by that school (19:517).

Robert Gundry gives a less extreme explanation for the variations between *the day of the Lord*, *the day of the Lord Jesus*, *the day of Christ*, and *the day of the Lord Jesus Christ*:

The variations suggest that we do not have a single technical phrase in contradistinction to the day of the Lord, but an expansion of the basic term “day of the Lord.” The more familiar names, “Jesus” and “Christ,” are added, or substituted, to accentuate the relationship of Christians to the day of the Lord. In a context concerning the wicked, an undertone of dread and

doom naturally pervades the passage. A reference to the saints’ hope naturally vibrates with joy and anticipation. (97-98)

That these alternate terms for the day of Christ connote relative emphases rather than fundamental differences is not only less extreme and more credible, but it does not forcibly impose a scheme of the rapture on verses that do not even mention this subject.

Judgment in the Day of Christ

In the Old Testament *the day of Jehovah* is used specifically to refer to the end-time judgments on Israel and the nations (Isa. 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15). In the New Testament, however, the phrase *day of the Lord* refers directly to Israel only once (Acts 2:20, a quotation of Joel 2:31) and to the nations or Antichrist twice (1 Thes. 5:2; 2 Thes.

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and ready. Those who
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2:2). The references to the believers more often, and appropriately, bear the name of Jesus or Christ.

Many of the verses that speak of the day of the Lord Jesus and the day of Christ include the thought of an appraisal, evaluation, or judgment on the believers. The Father has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42). Therefore, the day of the Lord is also the day of Christ, who will bear responsibility for the final judgments in it. Because of this, we cannot consider the day of the Lord to be altogether separate and different from the day of Christ. The day of the Lord and the day of Christ are related by the role of Christ as Judge. That Christ will be the Judge of the living means that at His coming back, before the millennium, He will judge the living from among the nations on His throne of glory (Matt. 25:31-46), and that He will be the Judge of the dead means that He will judge the resurrected unbelievers at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15).

Moreover, Christ in His aspect as the Judge is related also to the New Testament believers, who will be resurrected or raptured at the consummation of this age. Accordingly, the *bema* at which we will all appear is not only the “judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10) but also the “judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10). Christ’s judgment of the believers will transpire in the day of the Lord. Thus, although the day of judgment at the end of this age is most often called the day of the Lord, the day of Christ must also be understood to include the judgment of God’s household for His divine administration.

Philippians 2:16 says, “Holding forth the word of life, so that I may have a boast in the day of Christ that I did not run in vain nor labor in vain.” *Boast, run in vain, and labor in vain* all indicate that Paul expected a governmental evaluation to be passed on his labor with the Philippians. Paul’s perfecting of the believers was with the view of his boast in the day of Christ. His thought was that if the Philippians did not work out their own salvation with fear and trembling by cooperating with the God who operated in them, but instead became tainted with blame and guile and lost their shining function in the crooked and perverted generation (vv. 12-15), Paul would have no boast in them; rather, he would have run and labored among them in vain. This is similar to his word to the Colossians: “Admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man full-grown in Christ; for which also I labor, struggling according to His operation which operates in me in power” (1:28-29). In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul also struggled as a minister of the gospel in the light of the prize to be awarded on the day of Christ. He says,

Do you not know that those who run on a racecourse all run, but one receives the prize? Run in this way, that you

may lay hold. And everyone who contends exercises self-control in all things; they then, that they may receive a corruptible crown, but we, an incorruptible...I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest perhaps having preached to others, I myself may become disapproved. (vv. 24-25, 27)

For Paul to obtain a boast in the day of Christ was for him to be rewarded with an incorruptible crown—not salvation, which is by faith, but a reward in addition to salvation to be given in the day of Christ, when all believers will appear before His judgment seat to receive the reward each deserves. Once again, the day of Christ, as mentioned in Philippians 2:16, is related to the judgment of the believers’ life and work in this age. Scofield writes, “The ‘day of Christ’ relates wholly to the reward and blessing of saints at His coming, as ‘day of the Lord’ is connected with judgment” (Bible 1212). However, since the reward of the saints, or loss of reward, issues from their evaluation at Christ’s seat of judgment, the distinction between the two kinds of days mentioned here is diminished. The day of Christ also will be a day of judgment.

Philippians 1:6 says, “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun in you a good work will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” Verse 10 continues, “So that you may approve by testing the things which differ and are more excellent, that you may be pure and without offense unto the day of Christ.” First Corinthians 1:8 says, “Who will also confirm you until the end unreprouvable in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Likewise, 2 Corinthians 1:14 says, “We are your boast, just as you also are ours in the day of our Lord Jesus.” To be complete, pure, without offense, unreprouvable, and worthy of a boast on the day of Christ are all contingent on the believers’ cooperation with the Lord, their growth in the divine life, their subjective sanctification and transformation, and their fruitful labor for the Lord. All these things will be evaluated—for a boast or for disapproval—in the day of Christ.

Saved through Fire in the Day of the Lord

The New Testament reveals that the day of the Lord brings not only judgment but also salvation through judgment. First Corinthians 5 speaks of the case of a sinful brother in the church. Paul says,

I, on my part, though being absent in the body but present in the spirit, have already judged, as if being present, him who has thus done this, in the name of our Lord Jesus, when you and my spirit have been assembled, with the power of our Lord Jesus, to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.¹⁰ (vv. 3-5)

The sinful one spoken of here is a brother who had been

saved once for eternity. However, because of his sinfulness, he needed to be disciplined by the destruction of the sinful flesh, that he might be kept in a condition in which his spirit could be saved in the day of the Lord. In chapter 3, verses 13 through 15 say,

The work of each will become manifest; for the day will declare it, because it is revealed by fire, and the fire itself will prove each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward; if anyone's work is consumed, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The subject here is the evaluation of the work of genuine Christians. The quality of each man's work will be declared in "the day," that is, the day of the Lord, the day of Christ's second coming, when He will judge all the believers at His judgment seat (4:5; Matt. 25:19-30; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12). If anyone's work is found to be of gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Cor. 3:12), it will be rewarded by the coming and judging Lord, but the work of wood, grass, and stubble will be burned, causing the believer to suffer loss. This one will not lose his salvation, which is a free gift of God, eternal and unchangeable in nature (Heb. 5:9; John 10:28-29), but he will be saved "so as through fire," indicating the necessity of a punishment under God's government. To be saved in the day of the Lord and to be saved so as through fire are clear signs of the judgment rendered to a sinning believer as part of the negative aspect of the day of the Lord. Therefore, we cannot properly say, as Stanton does, "The Day of the Lord does not mention and has no application whatsoever to the Church saints" (81). Rather, the judgment of the believers in that day should be a solemn warning to us today concerning our Christian life and work.

Being Delivered from the Wrath Which Is Coming

Romans 5:9 says, "Much more then, having now been justified in His blood, we will be saved through Him from the wrath." Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says, "Await His Son from the heavens, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath which is coming." *Wrath* in these verses refers to the coming judgment of God on the unbelieving and disobedient (John 3:36; Rom. 2:5-6, 8-9; Col. 3:6), which will be carried out mainly at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15). Since the Lord's blood has released us from our sins, it has also

released us from judgment, condemnation, wrath, and death, which are related to sins. Through our believing into Christ, we are justified freely through His redemption, and we are delivered from the wrath of God that is righteously coming on unbelieving sinners.

The dispensational school of eschatology teaches that since the great tribulation is a time of wrath from God, and those who are justified are delivered from wrath, the believers in the church age cannot be present in the tribulation. Thus, as the teaching goes, the New Testament believers have no part in the day of the Lord and are exempt from any of its judgments. According to this teaching, this demands a pretribulation rapture of the church. Scofield says,

The Christian has explicit promises which make his presence in that scene of wrath impossible...And, since the method of the Divine deliverance from that wrath is the rapture of the Church, it follows that the church is removed before the wrath. (*Tribulation* 20)

Stanton adds, "The Church is promised, not wrath, but rapture" (50). There are several flaws with this line of reasoning. Watchman Nee says,

The great tribulation, on the one hand, is God's punishment and wrath upon the unbelievers; on the other hand, it is Satan's punishment and wrath upon the believers. Satan's attack on the believers causes them to come under great suffering, but this is not the believers' suffering under God's wrath. (15:304)

Again he says, "God punishes the unbelievers, whereas Satan afflicts the believers" (19:506). Therefore, we need not say that Christians in the tribulation will partake of the wrath of God. It is sufficient to note that when Satan is cast down to the earth, he will persecute the bright woman of Revelation 12, composed of those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus, that is, the Jews and the believers who will still remain on the earth (vv. 9, 13-17). At that time, a place of refuge will be given to the woman to preserve her throughout the three and a half years of Satan's wrath. Nevertheless, many of the Lord's children will still suffer deprivation, some will be imprisoned, and others will be martyred (Matt. 25:42-43; Rev. 13:7; 14:13; 20:4). Douglas J. Moo concludes,

While it is Jesus, the slain Lamb, who inaugurates the

To be saved in the day of the Lord and to be saved so as through fire are clear signs of the judgment rendered to a sinning believer as part of the negative aspect of the day of the Lord. The judgment of the believers in that day should be a solemn warning to us today concerning our Christian life and work.

events of the end, not all these events are of God's direct initiative nor is it fair to find in all of them the wrath of God...A number of the judgments of Revelation are traceable to Antichrist, who "utters blasphemies" (Rev. 13:5), takes the place of God, and demands worship. The persecution initiated by this figure cannot in any meaningful sense be attributed to God...Not only is it *possible*, it is *necessary* to distinguish between tribulation that has its origin in the wrath of Satan and the judgments that embody God's wrath. (Reiter 88-89)

Even the school of dispensationalism acknowledges that during the tribulation there will be a new and very large group of regenerated believers—the "tribulation saints"—who, although not part of the church (it is said), will nonetheless be saved by believing the gospel of Christ (Yates 217). This reveals another flaw in the dispensational teaching of exemption from wrath by a pretribulation rapture. Moo rightly questions why the exemption from the sufferings and trials of the tribulation is extended only to the pretribulation church and not to all believers:

Deliverance from God's wrath seems to be a constitutive part of salvation. To be justified is to be "saved from God's wrath" (Rom. 5:9) and the sacrifice of Christ once for all accomplished involved the propitiating of God's wrath...If every believer saved by the blood of Christ is exempted from divine wrath, then so, of course, those Tribulation saints will be. Therefore, exemption from divine wrath during the Tribulation...does not logically entail a pretribulation Rapture of the church. (Reiter 89-90)

Moo's logic is sound. If exemption from divine wrath applies to all believers, and there will be many believers in the tribulation, then exemption does not require a removal from the earth, which is the basis of dispensationalism's demand for a pretribulation rapture. Further, if a pretribulation rapture is a requirement for this exemption from wrath, then there would be no such person as a "tribulation saint."

The Wrath of God in the Great Tribulation

The wrath of God will be manifested in the day of the Lord, the time in which Christ will come to execute His judgment upon the world. Isaiah 13:9 says, "The day of Jehovah is coming— / Cruel and with overflowing wrath and burning anger." The New Testament words for *wrath* are ὀργή, a retributive anger, and θυμός, a passionate, bursting-forth anger (Thayer 452, 293). In Revelation they are used twelve times, occasionally translated as *rage* and *fury*. They refer once to the great rage of the devil (12:12) and twice to the fury of the fornication of Babylon the Great (14:8; 18:3). The other nine references are to the wrath, or fury, of God. In roughly chronological order,

they are as follows. (We will deal with an exception shortly.) In 14:10 the wine of the fury of God is promised to those who worship the beast and his image; this will be executed later, when the worshippers of the beast are cast into the lake of fire. In 11:18 the wrath of God comes at the sounding of the seventh trumpet, which takes place near the end of the great tribulation. In 15:1 and 7 and 16:1 the fury of God begins to be poured out in the seven bowls, the seven last plagues, which are the negative contents of the seventh trumpet. In 16:19 the cup of the wine of the fury of God's wrath is given to Babylon the Great at the pouring out of the seventh bowl. In 14:19 and 19:15 Christ treads the winepress of the fury of God's wrath in His coming in power to destroy Antichrist and his armies at Armageddon. Thus, all but one mention of the wrath of God in Revelation take place after the seventh trumpet begins to sound, which is very late into, near the end of, the great tribulation.¹¹ Moo concludes,

Divine wrath is confined to the very *end* of the Tribulation...The words ὀργή and θυμός are found mainly in descriptions of the climactic judgments just before and at the time of the Battle of Armageddon...Consistently, in fact, the inflicting of the wrath of God is confined to the last judgments at the end of the Tribulation. (Reiter 87-88)

It is also important to note upon whom the wrath of God is directed. As the foregoing verses indicate, God's wrath, the cup of His fury, will be poured out on the nations and the destroyers of the earth (11:18), those who worship Antichrist and his image and receive his mark (14:9-10; 16:2), the armies of Antichrist at Armageddon (14:19; 19:15), those who pour out the blood of saints and prophets (16:6), all the unrepentant ones in the kingdom of Antichrist (vv. 8-11), and Babylon the Great (v. 19). The saints—those who keep the commandments of God and have the faith and testimony of Jesus (12:17; 14:12)—are never directly mentioned in the passages related to the wrath of God. This is a strong indication that, by virtue of not being the objects of God's wrath, the believers are in fact delivered from it, whenever it occurs.

The purpose of the foregoing excursion is not to add support to a posttribulation scheme, such as that of Gundry, a "pre-wrath" plan, such as that of Marvin Rosenthal (241), or any scheme by which the church passes "triumphantly through the Great Tribulation relatively untouched" (Walvoord, *Question* 230).¹² Rather, it is to demonstrate that according to a simple, textual analysis of ὀργή and θυμός, the wrath of God is not directly mentioned in Revelation until the beginning of the seventh seal, which occurs near the end of the tribulation. Therefore, it is hasty and presumptuous to claim, as dispensational teachers do, that the believers' exemption from the wrath of God demands, even equates to, a

pretribulation rapture of the entire church. As the case of the “tribulation saints” makes clear, believers on the earth will not be exempt from the sufferings and trials of the great tribulation, including the wrath of Satan, the wrath of man, and the upheaval of the environment. At the opening of the sixth seal, the earth will be shaken when a great earthquake occurs and there will be signs in the heavens (6:12-17). These supernatural calamities will be the initiation of the tribulation. Following this, the first four trumpets of the seventh seal bring intensified supernatural calamities on the earth, the sea, the rivers, and the heavenly bodies (8:6-12). Then the fifth through seventh trumpets bring the three woes (v. 13), the greatest, severest, and intensified plagues, that touch not only man’s environment but man himself in a direct way.

However, at the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of God and of Christ. At this time the dead believers are raised, and all the believers who have remained on the earth until this time are raptured (11:15; 14:14-16). Following this, the seven bowls of the fury of God will be poured out on those who have the mark of the beast and who worship his image (16:2), on those who pour out the blood of saints and prophets (v. 6), on the throne of the beast (v. 10), and on the unrepentant and blasphemers in general (vv. 9, 11, 21). Although many believers will have passed through the greater part of the tribulation, they will not be upon the earth during this final and most severe phase.

The Day of the Lord Completing God’s Judgment on His Own House

A serious student of the eschatological issues surrounding the day of the Lord will very quickly encounter a confusing array of competing theories and definitions supported by often weak and prejudiced arguments in support of one or the other extremity of views. Frequently, these arguments are based on speculations and assumptions, such as what Paul had already taught the Thessalonians before he wrote the first Epistle to them (Walvoord, *Question* 199-200); which “-ism” about the rapture he had taught them in the few weeks he was with them (244; *Tribulation* 97; Reiter 224); how the fact that the rapture was a never-before-heard teaching for the Thessalonians infers a pretribulation rapture (Stanton 88); how the shout of command, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God will be heard by the church only and not by the whole world (1 Thes. 4:16; Kelly, “Coming” 59); whether

denying a universal pretribulation rapture would “scare” the Thessalonians rather than comfort them, creating “a sort of spiritual nightmare” (Stanton 87; Kelly, “Prophecy” 43); why the distinction between *the day of the Lord* and *the day of the Lord Jesus* necessarily demands a particular school of the rapture; why the early disciples were promised deliverance by the coming of Christ when in fact they died before He came (Walvoord, *Question* 236); and whether Paul’s saying nothing about one view in a certain passage supports and strengthens the opposite view as an argument by silence. The literature abounds with such issues, often accompanied with prejudiced, circular, and confusing arguments. For this reason, a proper understanding of the day of the Lord is crucial.

At the end of the present age, Christ in His second coming will accomplish a number of important matters necessary to turn the age to that of the kingdom. This will constitute a crucial portion of His work for the fulfillment of God’s eternal economy. He will save many in Israel and prepare that people to be gathered together to Him. He will also deal thoroughly with the unbelieving, rebellious, and Antichrist-worshipping nations, eventually destroying their leader and his armies at Armageddon. All these matters will transpire in the day of the Lord, which will begin near the time of the opening of the sixth seal, near the commencement of the great tribulation of three and a half years. Just prior to this time, He will appear as the morning star (2 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 2:28; 22:16) to His watchful and overcoming believers and will rapture them to the throne of God in the

heavens. However, the majority of the believers living at that time will pass into the tribulation, in which many will suffer the wrath of Satan, the wrath of man, and upheavals in the environment. As a result, these believers will mature in life to bear the testimony of Jesus, and some will even win a martyr’s crown. Then near the end of the tribulation, they will be raptured, and all the believers throughout all the centuries will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This too will take place in the day of the Lord. Thus, that extended day will be the time for God to exercise His government, with His governmental judgments, on all the peoples of the earth—Jews, Christians, and the nations.

To this end, we, the believers at the present time, must be diligent, watchful, and faithful. We must watch for the Lord’s coming as for a thief in the night, beseeching that we would “prevail to escape all these things which are

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Near the end of the tribulation,
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before the judgment seat of Christ.*

about to happen and stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). Moreover, as those whose intrinsic, new nature is of light, we must walk as children of light and sons of the day. We must not sleep but should be sober, putting on the weapons of warfare to cooperate with the indwelling Christ so that we may obtain His salvation from the coming destruction through His return with judgment. However, many Christians will not maintain this kind of spiritual exercise. Robert Govett states,

Many Christians, specially of those who despise prophecy, are spiritually asleep. They are pursuing, with full bent of soul, the world’s prizes. And thus they are blind to the effects of the Saviour’s return. Here, then, we obtain a reply to the momentous question: “Is it *perdition* for such to give themselves up to spiritual slumber?” And the reply, in grace, is: “No!”...But, like the disciples slumbering in Gethsemane, such will be caught in the Day of Temptation. The unbelief is partial, not total; but there will be loss of reward.¹³ (45)

The first loss of reward will be to miss the early rapture, in which Christ as a thief comes to steal the watching and beseeching overcomers.

The account of the evil slave, who began to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with the drunken (Matt. 24:48-51), reminds us that even a true believer, appointed by the Lord to His service, can be overtaken by coldness, indolence, and the attraction of the present age, thus losing his watchfulness and sobriety. To genuine believers—who are eternally saved but unfaithful, drunken, and slumbering—the day of the Lord will result in their temporary, dispensational ruin. To be saved from the perdition of the unbelievers requires a simple act of faith in the redeeming blood of Christ, but to be fully delivered from the disciplinary judgments that are coming with the day of the Lord requires the full cooperation and pursuit of a Christian.

Philippians 1:10 says, “That you may be pure and without offense unto the day of Christ.” Concerning this verse, Darby states, “Where the expression ‘the day of Christ’ occurs, it means the day when He comes to judge; it is always so when it refers to our responsibility” (*Writings* 17:374). The day of Christ’s judgment will include His judgment seat, before which all believers will appear (2 Cor. 5:10). There, some will be found unreprouvable in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:8), have a boast in the day of Christ (Phil. 2:16), become a boast for others in the day of our Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 1:14), and, like Paul, be recompensed with a crown in that day (2 Tim. 4:8). For others, however, the day of Christ’s judgment will manifest their works as natural, of the fallen man, and from an earthen source, thus worthless for God’s building. Because of this, they will be saved in the day of the Lord, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 5:5).

Those who pass successfully through the judgment seat of Christ will take part in the marriage of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7) and enter into the millennium to have the fullest enjoyment of Christ and to rule with Him as His co-kings in His kingdom. However, those who are found lacking at the judgment seat will miss the reward of the kingdom and fall under the discipline of God’s government. This too will take place in the day of the Lord, the period of God’s judgment that begins with the great tribulation and ends after the millennium. Thus, the day of the Lord will complete God’s judgment—His disciplinary dealings in His governmental administration—over His own house (1 Pet. 4:17). It is altogether incorrect to claim that “the Day of the Lord does not mention and has no application whatsoever to the Church saints” (Stanton 81). It has very much to do with the believers’ exercise today and judgment in the future. This is one of the basic teachings of the apostles, and it was disclosed by Paul, Peter, and John.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹The first four seals, disclosed in Revelation 6:1-8, should not be considered part of the eschatological day of the Lord. These seals contain a white horse, signifying the preaching of the gospel; a red horse, signifying war; a black horse, signifying famine; and a pale horse, signifying death. Immediately after Christ’s ascension, these four things—the gospel, war, famine, and death—began to run like riders on four horses, and they will continue until Christ comes back (Recovery Version, 6:2, note 2). In 6:9-11 Christ opens the fifth seal, disclosing martyrdom from the first century to the time near the end of this age. After this, at the commencement of the great tribulation, the sixth seal comes as God’s answer to the cry of these martyred saints.

²For a discussion of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, please see *Affirmation & Critique*, XII.2, Oct. 2007, pages 73-80.

³Much has been said about the opening words of 1 Thessalonians 5:1. Those who teach a pretribulation rapture of the church frequently refer to “but” (δέ) as denoting a complete change of subject between chapters 4 and 5 (Walvoord, *Question* 219). Paul D. Feinberg adds that περί δέ, as in verse 1, all the more demands a new topic (Reiter 226). The object of this argument is to divorce the rapture in chapter 4 from the day of the Lord in chapter 5, as Gerald Stanton remarks, “The two subjects are worlds apart” (88). In doing so, they seek to assert that all the believers will have been taken from the earth before the day of the Lord’s judgment begins; as those appointed to salvation, they are not even to regard that day at all. Such arguments lack validity. In chapter 5, the Thessalonians, who were awaiting the coming of the Lord (1:10; 2:19; 3:13), were charged to take the day of the Lord as an incentive to watchfulness and soberness (5:4-8).

⁴If the text of 1 Thessalonians 5 is taken literally, there is no

mention of the rapture in this chapter. Thus, there is very little that can directly indicate the time of the rapture with respect to the coming of the day of the Lord. Because of this, John F. Walvoord warns against any generalizations about this matter, as in all “difficult points of exegesis” (*Question* 212, 214). Definite conclusions derived from this passage concerning the rapture are more probably gleaned from assumptions and *a priori* opinions than from the text itself.

⁵Some, representing the school of dispensationalism, have made the mistake of interpreting day and night in 1 Thessalonians 5:5 as literal periods of time, day referring to the dispensation of the church and night to the period of the great tribulation. According to dispensational ecclesiology (which is the driving force of their eschatology), the church can be present on the earth only until the beginning of the tribulation. This necessitates, they claim, that the entire church must be raptured before the day of the Lord. William K. Harrison says,

Taking night and day as periods of time, they cannot exist at the same time. Since the Day of the Lord begins at night, the church being of the day necessarily will not be present, having already joined the Lord in the air” (320).

In the same principle, Walvoord says,

The thief is going to come in the night, but the believers are declared not to belong to the night or the darkness. The implication is quite clear that believers are in a different time reference; that is, they belong to the day that precedes the darkness. (*Question* 221)

However, it is more accurate to avoid the dispensational connotation and consider day and night to represent not times or ages but spiritual principles and natures, which will certainly exist together on the earth until the day of the Lord.

⁶As a highly effective proponent of dispensationalism, Scofield echoes Darby’s teaching on the exclusion and exemption of the church from the day of the Lord. Nevertheless, his admonition here is wise and pertinent.

⁷We have already dealt in detail with the interpretation of “that which restrains” (2 Thes. 2:6-7). Please see *Affirmation & Critique*, XII.2, Oct. 2007, pages 82-85.

⁸Dispensational eschatology is actually a derivative of its ecclesiology. Accordingly, if an argument for the pretribulation rapture of the church becomes in need of support that is not provided by a particular portion of the Scriptures, the teachers of this school often fall back on the circular argument that it must be so because the truth of the church demands it. Thus, they say, to deny the rapture of the church before the day of the Lord is to set aside the whole order of the dispensations of God,

“to deny and destroy the proper faith of the church of God, and to set the church itself aside” (Darby, *Writings* 11:119, 122). Having the ecclesiology of the dispensations of God as a basis for eschatology implicitly excuses these teachers, at times, from employing objective and reasonable exegesis. This is most apparent in their treatment of 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, as we have seen above.

⁹To distinguish the day of the Lord from the day of Christ is a departure from the original teaching of John Darby. To be sure, Darby distinguished the coming of Christ from the day of the Lord, but he did not insist on the phraseology now employed in dispensational teaching. He writes,

Confounding *the day of the Lord* and His coming to receive the church is not a mere mistake in terms, but a subversion of the whole nature of the relationship between Christ and the church...He who confounds *the day of Christ* with His coming to receive the church knows neither what His day is, nor His coming, nor the church. (*Writings* 11:161, emphasis added)

Again he says, “We shall be in the full enjoyment of glory before the day of Christ” (66). To Darby, the day of the Lord and the day of Christ were one. This created a problem for the pretribulation view of the rapture, because several notable verses encourage the believers to remain faithful under the Lord’s perfection until the day of Christ (Phil. 1:6, 10; 1 Cor. 1:8), that is, the day of the Lord. Samuel P. Tregelles capitalized upon this fact to teach a posttribulation rapture (88-89). This required the heirs of Darby’s teachings to divorce the day of Christ from the day of the Lord. Walvoord compromises somewhat by stating that if the day of the Lord is a

period of time that includes the entire tribulation, the day of Christ may simply mark the beginning of that time (*Question* 232). As we point out above, this too is not the whole truth of the matter.

¹⁰“The day of the Lord” is the reading of the Vaticanus manuscript, as well as of the ancient P46, one of the earliest extant witnesses. As such, this reading is adopted by the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, editions 26 and 27. Bruce M. Metzger writes, “The reading that best explains the origin of the other readings is *κρίου*, well attested by early and important manuscripts and Fathers” (550).

¹¹The exception to this general rule is found in Revelation 6:16-17, in which men say to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of Their wrath has come.” This takes place at the sixth seal, which is near the beginning of the tribulation. It is important to note, though,

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cooperation and pursuit
of a Christian.*

that this is the word of kings, great men, generals, the rich and strong, and the slave and free man—that is, unbelievers and sinners—who speak in this way “according to the feeling of their conscience, fearing the coming of the judgment of God. It is not a proclamation of God concerning the coming of His judgment” (Recovery Version, v. 16, note 1). Feinberg notes, “The statement about the wrath of God is in the mouths of unbelievers, not angelic or divine messengers” (Reiter 60). Thus, it should not be taken with the same authority as the other mentions of wrath in Revelation.

The reader will further note that the Old Testament companion to the above passage in Revelation is Joel 2:30-31. In the latter, the prophet speaks of the “great and terrible day of Jehovah” without employing the term *wrath* (*aph*, *ebrah*, or synonyms).

¹²The end-time chronologies mentioned here all have their particular problems. Both Gundry (98) and Rosenthal (117), for example, incorrectly place the day of the Lord near the end of or after the tribulation.

¹³Writing as early as the 1850s, Robert Govett was a contemporary of Darby. It is a shortcoming and a shortsightedness that neither Darby nor his followers ever acknowledged him.

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Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

“Now we ask you, brothers, with regard to the **coming** of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him” (2 Thes. 2:1).

coming: According to the context, *the day of the Lord* in v. 2 refers to the day of the Lord's parousia (coming), in which the rapture of the majority of the believers will occur. Verse 3 tells us affirmatively that before that day Antichrist will be revealed to play the major role in the great tribulation (v. 4; Rev. 13:1-8, 12-15). This reveals clearly and definitely that the Lord's coming (parousia) to the air and the rapture of the majority of the believers cannot take place before the great tribulation.