

TUTORIAL

3.24

The Day of the Lord

In this tutorial, Bible presenter Scot Keen explains his view on the day of the Lord, which is mentioned in chapter five of first Thessalonians.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we will look at Paul's challenge to the believers in Thessalonica to have a proper perspective of the day of the Lord. Paul encourages the believers to keep going by living in light of their hope. Let's look at 1 Thessalonians 5:1, "Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night."

A contrast

Paul seems to change topics after chapter four (in which Paul discusses an event which I call the rapture). In chapter four verse thirteen, Paul says, "We don't want you to be uninformed." Then he goes on to talk about this event that I call the rapture. In chapter five, Paul says, "You yourselves know full well," and then he talks about the day of the Lord. Now, this seems to imply that they were ignorant of the material in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, but that they were aware of the content in chapter five. So, it does set these passages in a bit of a contrast and lets us know that Paul is changing topics at some level here.

He says again, "As to the times and seasons you have no need of anything to be written to you. You know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night." This raises the question, "What is the day of the Lord?" Now, those familiar with the Old Testament would know that the day of the Lord is a major theme which appears in books such as Joel, Amos and Zephaniah. It has its roots in the book of Deuteronomy where God begins to talk about a day of visitation. The day of the Lord is a time period of judgement on earth which is unparalleled in its severity. Jesus talked about this day in Matthew chapter twenty-four. He said that this great tribulation will be unparalleled in its severity. So, we are talking about a time period that is

extremely severe. It will be the time of God's judgement on the earth and it has a particular purpose. In Isaiah chapter twenty-six, God says that He is going to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity. Think of it like this; God's posture right now is one of mercy. He is holding out His hand, as 2 Peter says, "Not willing that any should perish but that all would come to repentance."

But God is not going to extend His arm of salvation forever. At some point in the future, there will be a time when God no longer shows forbearance and brings judgement instead. He will punish the nations for their iniquity (Isaiah 26). This time period is so specifically designed for Israel, that in Jeremiah chapter thirty, it is called the time of Jacob's trouble. God is going to use this great tribulation, this day of the Lord, to bring Israel to her knees. Remember we saw in the tutorials on Romans that there will be a future salvation for the nation of Israel? This day of the Lord is part of the picture; it is how God is going to bring them to the point of recognising their need, repenting for their sin of crucifying Messiah and ultimately placing their faith in Him.

Hopefully that gives you some background on the day of the Lord. God's purpose in it, then, is to bring Israel to repentance. Paul says that this day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Then he explains himself further, "While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape." The day of the Lord is a time of judgement that is inescapable. The passages in Zephaniah, Joel, and Amos all echo the same thing. As far as it being inescapable, Zephaniah says their silver and their gold cannot deliver them. In Joel we find that it is so severe that he asks the question, "Who can abide it?" Then Amos says it is like a man who is running from a bear. He runs into his house, puts his hand on the wall in relief and then a snake bites him on the hand. You cannot get away from the day of the Lord.

Taken by surprise

That is the picture that Paul paints in the book of 1 Thessalonians as well. He says sudden destruction will come like labour pains upon a pregnant woman and they will not escape. God's judgement will be inescapable. It is interesting that Paul says it comes like a thief in the night. It is obviously unexpected, but not because there was no warning. We know that there are many warnings, specifically in the Old Testament, concerning the day of the Lord. So it will not be a surprise in the sense that there was no warning. It will be a surprise because no one listened to the warnings. Think about the days of Noah as an example. Noah warned the people that the flood was coming.

Even though the people were warned, it still took them by surprise. As Jesus said, they were getting married right up until the time that the flood came. It surprised people because they did not believe God's warning. Likewise, Paul says the day of the Lord come suddenly like labour pains for a pregnant woman. This is a comical picture to me because when I think about something

that comes unexpectedly, I wouldn't typically think about labour pains for a woman. The labor pains obviously indicate that a woman is getting closer to giving birth to her child. Speaking from experience with our first born, we were over eight months into the pregnancy. And suddenly one night my wife woke me to tell me her water had broken. I was shocked. Looking back, I don't know why I was shocked. She was supposed to have a baby. But again, I wasn't expecting it at that time. What Paul says here is that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. People will be predicting peace and safety at the time. I think this is the time alluded to in Daniel chapter nine. It mentions a peace treaty that is signed with Israel for seven years. The antichrist evidently breaks the peace treaty in the midst of this seven-year period. So, people will be anticipating peace and safety, but in the meantime, destruction will come suddenly and they will not escape.

I see the same picture in first Thessalonians chapter five. But first, please know that the reason they do not escape is not that the lake of fire overtakes them suddenly. It is the day of the Lord that comes upon people unexpectedly. So, people will be predicting peace and safety but then sudden destruction will come and they will not escape. Listen to what Paul is saying. Sudden destruction. Day of the Lord. Thief in the night. The idea of *sudden* parallels with *thief in the night*. *Destruction* parallels *day of the Lord*. Paul is using different terminology to speak about the same event. He is saying that what comes suddenly is destruction. The day of the Lord will take people unawares.

A distinction

Notice Paul's choice of words here. Who is it who are overtaken by the day of the Lord? Paul puts a distinction between *us* and *them*. He says that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Some people will be predicting peace and safety, and destruction will come upon them. I do not think that is an accidental reference, rather, it is intentional on Paul's part. Paul is saying that the ones who predict peace and safety are the ones who will face sudden destruction. They are the ones who will not escape.

Then Paul brings us to what I understand is a contrast. He begins talking about believers in relation to the day of the Lord. This is significant in the book of first Thessalonians as a whole. I take the position, as I said earlier, that these believers are waiting for God's Son from heaven to deliver them from the wrath to come, which is wrath that is coming to the earth. While chapter one verse ten is not enough to convince us of that, chapter five tells us that the wrath that is coming is the day of the Lord. Paul says that they have been waiting to be rescued from the wrath to come. Now he explains why they will be rescued from it.

Let's look at the contrast in verse four, "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day." Paul talks firstly about their identity. He does not mention their

understanding or the way that they are living their lives. He will talk about that later in verses six and following, challenging them to live like who they already are. But here Paul is talking about their identity as sons of the day. Paul says, "You are not in darkness that that day would overtake you. You are sons of the light and sons of the day."

We could either read this in one of two ways. When Paul says they are not in darkness, we could think of darkness as ignorance. If we read it that way, Paul would be saying that others will be surprised but the believers won't because they are not ignorant. In other words, Paul could be saying that the believers will not be surprised by the day of the Lord. They will be ready for it.

However, that is not what I think Paul is saying here. When Paul says, "You are not in darkness," I think he is talking about their identity and standing before God. They are not in darkness because they are saved. They are in the light. They are sons of the day and they should live that way. Let me give some examples of this concept from the first century world. In John 12:36, Jesus talks about this concept, "While you have the light," he calls himself the light of the world, "while you have the light, believe in the light." Look at the result, "So that you may become sons of the light." We are talking about an issue of identity, not about how much we understand or our lack of awareness. Paul says, "Believe in the light and then you become sons of the light."

Another clue that Paul is referring to identity is found in Colossians chapter one. Paul says that the believers have been translated out of the kingdom of darkness, "He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son." I take this to be a statement of identity. Jesus uses this terminology in John chapter twelve and Paul uses it in Colossians chapter one. We can also find it in Ephesians 5:6-8, "Let no one deceive you with empty words. Because of these things, the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." Paul is talking about unbelievers here. Sons of disobedience. "Therefore, do not be partakers with them." Don't live like unbelievers. And Paul explains why.

He says, "You formerly were darkness but now you are light in the Lord." He is not talking about the way they live, he is talking about their identity. I know that because he says, "You are light in the Lord." That is their identity. "Walk as children of the light." That's the way they live. In other words, Paul is saying, "This is who you are, a child of light, so live that way. Walk as children of the light." Well, that is my understanding of Paul's contrast here. So, I take Paul to be saying, "They say peace and safety. Sudden destruction comes upon them. They will not escape, but brothers, this is not what you'll face." That is the way I read this. They are sons of the light. They are not in darkness.

Applying doctrine

Now that Paul has distinguished the believers from unbelievers, he gives an application of that doctrine. He challenges them to live like who they are. Look at how he does this. In Ephesians 5:6 he says, "So then," which signifies that he is about to apply doctrine, "So then, let us not sleep as others do but let us be alert and sober." It would make sense for an unbeliever to be checked out and unaware and living a clueless life, but Paul says that is not who we are, so we should not live that way. "Let us not sleep as others do, but let's be alert and sober. Those who sleep do their sleeping at night. Those who get drunk get drunk at night."

If someone has a habit of getting drunk, it is not a surprise if they get drunk at night. That is typical for them at that time of day. If someone sleeps at night, we don't say, "Wow, how unusual. They're sleeping at night time." No. It is normal to sleep at night; that is when we sleep. So, Paul is saying let's be consistent with who we are, "Since we are of the day, let us be sober" (Ephesians 5:8). Let's live like who God has made us to be. And how do we do that? By doing the daytime things that he speaks of, "Having put on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet, the hope of salvation."

These are pieces of armour that Roman soldiers would wear. Paul says we need to arm ourselves with faith and love and hope. Do you remember how we defined hope at the beginning of our study on Thessalonians? Hope produces perseverance. Hope, in Pauline theology, is eschatological hope. It is the coming of Christ. It is, in my understanding, the rapture which gets us out of here. So Paul is saying that we have this hope of salvation and we need to live with it in mind. If I am correct in saying the hope of salvation is the hope of deliverance, then it completely ties in with verse nine.

Paul explains why we have the hope of salvation. He says, "for," which means he is explaining what he just said. "For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with him." This is a beautiful thing here. When Paul says God has not destined us for wrath, here are the questions I believe we need to be asking. First of all, what is wrath in context? Secondly, what is salvation in context? The wrath in context, I believe, is the great tribulation or the day of the Lord. Notice how Paul does not stick with one phrase here.

The wrath of God

In verse two, he calls this event the day of the Lord. Then he says it comes like a thief in the night. In verse three he calls it destruction and he tells us that it will come suddenly. Then in verse nine he names it wrath. The wrath in the context of first Thessalonians, especially chapter five, is the wrath of the day of the Lord. That is what he is talking about in those paragraphs. If that is the case, Paul is saying we have a helmet, the hope of deliverance. He explains specifically that God has not destined us believers for wrath. He has not

destined us to predict peace and safety and then have sudden destruction come upon us. He has destined us to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul says salvation comes through Christ. I take this context to be the wrath of God on earth, the day of the Lord. Therefore the deliverance he is talking about is deliverance from the day of the Lord. Now, I think it is talking about a pre-tribulation rapture. Here's why. The day of the Lord is unparalleled in severity and so is the tribulation, so they must be the same thing. If that is the case and God has not destined us for that, but has destined to deliver us from it, then God has destined to deliver us from the tribulation or the day of the Lord.

Now, some take the position that God is going to deliver us through the day of the Lord, meaning He puts His hands around us and He keeps us safe through the tribulation. That does not fit with the book of Revelation when it speaks about all the people who are martyred during the tribulation. So that is why I take this position. Again, everyone has to come to their own conclusions.

Let's go now to verse ten, "He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with him." At first glance, it looks like awake and asleep are dealing with being dead or alive, as we saw in chapter four. But in reality, the words that Paul uses here are actually different. Paul is probably saying that since we are sons of the day (since we are believers), we should be doing daytime things. He says we should be awake and not asleep. Yet, even if we are asleep or awake, we will live together with Him. I think the idea is simply this. Believers should live for the Lord, but even if they don't (God forbid), they will still live together with Him. Why is that? Because He died for us.

Our salvation is rooted in what He did and not how we live. It is similar to the difference between the Israelites and the Egyptians in the book of Exodus. God, too, puts a difference between the church and the unbelieving world. They predict peace and safety. They face sudden destruction, but God has destined us for salvation, which in context, I believe, is deliverance from the day of the Lord.

Encouraged to persevere

Finally Paul concludes the book by urging the believers to keep going. Paul encourages healthy interaction in the body of Christ as part of their continuing growth in the Lord. Look at Ephesians 5:12, "We request to you brothers, that you appreciate those who diligently labour among you and have charge or authority over you and the Lord and give you instruction. That you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another." Now, my approach to scripture is if Paul "corrects" a problem, then that means the problem likely already exists. For example in chapter four,

when Paul says, "Avoid sexual immorality," the implication is that they were involved in sexual immorality. Here in chapter five where Paul says to appreciate spiritual leadership and to esteem them with respect, we can gather that the church was not showing proper respect.

If you think about this practically, believers' continued growth in the Lord is going to be in jeopardy if they do not relate well to the spiritual leadership that God has given them. According to Hebrews chapter thirteen, spiritual leadership is given for the sake of the body. Church leadership are to watch over our souls. So, we want to relate well with the leadership in a local church because that is one of the ways in which God helps us become mature in the faith. Another way we become mature is by ministering to the needs of others. Look at verse fourteen, Paul says, "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

I love this verse because Paul doesn't say to encourage the unruly or admonish the weak. His instructions are specific to how each person is living. It is the unruly who need to be warned and the faint hearted who need to be encouraged and the weak who need help. This means that for you and me to be able to minister to the spiritual needs of other believers, we have to know what their needs are. Their needs will determine the way in which we should build them up. That cannot happen apart from spending time with other believers.

As people in ministry, we need to be spending time with those we seek to disciple so we can recognise their needs. In verse fifteen Paul says, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people." As we are interacting with one another and happen to discourage or hurt each other, we should not pay back evil for evil.

Then Paul tells us to trust God daily. Look at verses sixteen to eighteen, Paul says, "Rejoice always." He is saying this to a persecuted church and he is aware that they are persecuted. Yet, he is trying to lift their eyes away from the here and now towards their hope in Christ and their reason to rejoice. We can always trust God because we know He is not going to leave us here forever. So there is an encouragement for us there. Paul also says to pray without ceasing. This does not mean that believers are to literally pray for every second of the day, but that we are to be given to prayer, devoted to prayer. Our lives are to be characterised by dependence upon God. Look at verse eighteen, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Prophetic utterances

Now, Paul talks about proper attitudes towards the Spirit's ministry in verse nineteen. In the first century before the Scriptures were completed, there were people who gave prophetic utterances and during that time period it was important to learn from those. Paul says do not quench the Spirit and then proceeds to explain what He means by that. He says we are not to despise prophetic utterances. At times God moved an individual to give a prophetic utterance.

We see this in the book of Acts; different people prophesied, like Agabus who warned of a coming famine. Paul says they were not to quench the Spirit by placing no value on prophetic utterances. The danger, though, is that prophetic utterances could lead to imitation. So notice how Paul gives a caveat here in verse twenty-one, "Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." They would test these prophetic utterances by comparing them to the Word of God. If the prophecy was consistent, then they could embrace it, but if it was not, they were supposed to recognise it for what it was: not the Truth of God's Word.

A conclusion

Finally, Paul concludes the book in 1 Thessalonians 5:23- 28, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is praying that God would continue His work of sanctification in them, and then he adds, "Faithful is he who calls you, and he also will bring it to pass."

I don't think we should take from this that it does not matter how we live our lives because God will sanctify us anyway. I think Paul is giving us note of confidence by assuring us that God is committed to this. It does not mean that our response is unimportant, but it does mean that he will ultimately be the one to establish us and bring us to maturity.

Then Paul moves on to a prayer request in 1 Thessalonians 5:25, "Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss". Some people take this to be a literal statement. It was obviously literal in Paul's day. It was a culturally appropriate way to show Christian love. In my culture, this translates to a good handshake or a warm pat on the back, or something like that. Paul then says, "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren." Now, this is significant because it shows the habit of the first century church to give attention to the public reading of Scripture and it also shows that Paul recognised His letters as having apostolic authority. That was why he wanted them read in the assemblies. It would be read and understood as an authoritative document having come from Paul the apostle. So, that explains why he adjured them by the Lord to have it read. Then finally, Paul closes in verse twenty-eight, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."



DISCUSSION POINTS

The Day of the Lord

1. In 1st Thessalonians 5, Paul makes distinctions between “us” and “them.” Can you identify these distinctions?
2. Paul speaks about God’s wrath in 1st Thessalonians 5. Based on the context, what is meant by “wrath”?
3. In 1st Thessalonians 5:12, Paul highlighted the importance of respecting church leadership. In what ways could their response to Paul’s instruction impact their walk with God (if they respond positively... negatively...)?