



THE DAY OF THE LORD

Amos 5:18-24, John 12:27-37

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Long ago, the Old Testament prophet Amos warned of the coming “Day of the Lord.” What does this expression mean? It’s used with some frequency in the Bible, yet modern readers often find it confusing. In this message, we’ll take a closer look at the Day of the Lord as it is used in the Bible and consider both what it is, and how we can prepare for it.

A DAY OF GOD’S JUSTICE

The Day of the Lord is an expression that occurs eighteen times in the Hebrew Bible. The oldest recorded use of the expression is found in the Old Testament book of Amos, which dates back to the middle of the 8th C BC. A similar expression, “on that day,” occurs over two hundred times in the Old Testament. Likewise in the New Testament we find phrases like “that day” or “that hour” used in the same way. In the great majority of cases, what the “Day of the Lord” and similar biblical expressions refer to is a time when God will intervene decisively in human affairs in order to accomplish his justice. The Day of the Lord is about the justice of God.

Justice is one of the most important themes in the Christian Bible. In the Old Testament, the idea of justice is captured by two Hebrew words, often used in parallel with one another: *tzadekah* and *mishpat*. *Tzadekah* is sometimes called “primary justice” and often translated as “righteousness.” *Tzadekah* “refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity.”² *Mishpat* is sometimes called “rectifying justice,” and it describes what must be done on behalf of those who are suffering or mistreated, often because their neighbors don’t practice *tzadekah*. Over and over in the Bible, *mishpat* describes what must be done to care for widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor. Taken together, *tzadekah* and *mishpat* capture what our society will be like after Christ returns and makes all things new. As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.”³ When Jesus returns in glory, every broken thing will be repaired, every broken heart mended, and every injustice punished in full.

¹ The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar within the western church, sort of like New Year’s Day for the majority of Christians around the world. Advent is a version of the Latin word that means “coming.” During Advent, Christians commemorate the *first* coming of Jesus Christ as an infant born in Bethlehem long ago. Advent is also a time when Christians look forward to Jesus’ *second* coming, when he will return to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. Traditionally Advent begins like a telescope looking towards Jesus’ second advent, and then gradually the focus draws closer and closer to Christmas. Especially at the beginning of Advent each year, Christians remember that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again,” and therefore Christians set their hopes on Christ’s triumphant return.

² Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., Sermon, Washington National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.

Ultimately the great and final Day of the Lord will come when Christ returns and restores God's justice throughout all of God's creation. Yet that day will not be the only Day of the Lord because God is not content to defer his justice completely until Jesus comes again. From time to time throughout history, God has intervened in human affairs to accomplish his justice. Such occasions are also identified in the Bible as Days of the Lord. For example, when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 587 BC, Jeremiah described the event using Day of the Lord language (Lam 2:21-22). God sent the Babylonians to accomplish his justice and put an end to Jerusalem's mistreatment of widows and orphans (Isa 1:17, 23; 10:2) and the poor (Isa 3:14-15; 10:2). All such "days" anticipate the climactic, final Day of the Lord when Christ comes again in glory.

A DAY OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

The Old Testament prophet Amos foretold an imminent Day of the Lord in Amos 5:18-24. This is the oldest reference to the Day of the Lord in the Bible, but evidently the idea was not original to Amos. It's clear from the passage that the people of Israel had been anticipating the Day of the Lord for some time. In fact, they were talking it up and looking forward to it (v 18).

Amos, however, came to warn them. Amos was not a scholar or a religious professional. He was a shepherd from a village outside of Jerusalem. God called Amos to travel into the northern Kingdom of Israel in order to confront the nation's political and religious establishment. Amos was perfect for the job, because he cared deeply about justice. God had patiently endured the northern kingdom's apostasy and rank disregard for justice for many years, but the situation had deteriorated to the point that God could not stand it any longer. So he sent Amos to warn them to repent or face imminent judgment.

From the historical evidence available to us, we can piece together the state of the Northern Kingdom when Amos arrived. It was a time of peace and enormous wealth and prosperity for many people living in Israel at the time. Not since the unified kingdom under the reign of King Solomon had things been so good. King Jeroboam II was now on the throne in Israel. He was seen as the political and spiritual heir of their nation's founder, Jeroboam I.⁴ As it was under Jeroboam I, so also under Jeroboam II there was a spiritual revival of sorts. Worshippers were flocking back to the (heretical) golden calf temples dedicated to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The mood throughout the land was optimistic and hopeful. Most Israelites were in very good shape—except for those who continued to suffer from poverty and injustice.

So why were the Israelites looking forward to the Day of the Lord, as Amos said in 5:18? They believed that God was going to "make Israel great again." In the zero sum game of Ancient Near Eastern politics, the Israelites believed that God was about to bless them while cursing all their neighbors. Only one nation could be on top. They believed that the Day of the Lord would reestablish Solomon's empire with King Jeroboam II on the throne.

⁴ The national mood under King Jeroboam II was probably akin to what it would be like in the United States if a direct descendant of George Washington—bearing the name "George Washington"—were elected president.

Sadly, the Israelites were blind to God's fury towards them, especially because of their sin and injustice. Amos said in 5:18-20 that the coming Day of the Lord would bring judgment rather than blessing. It would be darkness rather than light (vv 18, 20). It would be like escaping from a lion and running into a bear, then fleeing inside the house only to be bitten by a snake (v 19). One commentator puts it this way:

Like the student who receives an F for a paper he thought was brilliant, or the employee fired after doing what he thought was excellent work, or the person whose spouse suddenly announces that he or she wants a divorce when the marriage seemed to be going so well, the Israelites were undoubtedly stunned by such a reversal of their expectations.⁵

In vv 21-23, it's clear that Amos was speaking not to atheists but to actively religious people. They were people who made a big deal out of the holidays every year (v 21), both the feasts like Thanksgiving and the fasts like Ash Wednesday. They were also serious about tithing and symbolic acts of worship (v 22). And they loved praise and worship music (v 23). God, however, was disgusted by it all. He said that he hates their feasts (v 21), he would not accept or look at their offerings (v 22), and he wouldn't even listen to their music (v 23).

Why did God reject all of their religious activity? Because of their fundamental disregard for justice: "But let *mishpat* roll down like waters, and *tzadekah* like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). One way or another, God would put an end to their injustice and unrighteousness. It could be through true repentance, as they redirected their energies towards people on the margins. Or it could be through the coming Day of the Lord, when God would intervene to set things right. Sadly, for the Israelites in Amos' day, it required the latter to put an end to their injustice. The Day of the Lord came to Israel in the form of the Assyrian empire. God poured out his wrath upon the Israelites because they would not repent of their wicked ways.

A DAY OF GOD'S MERCY

It's always difficult to talk about God's wrath. We have a love/hate relationship with the wrath of God. On the one hand, we want God to pour out his wrath upon despots like Fidel Castro, whom many public figures have already assigned to hell with absolute confidence. Many of us have no problem speaking of God's wrath in this way. On the other hand, when it comes to our own sins and failures, we want to be shielded from God's wrath. As someone said after Castro's death, "I want to die like Castro peacefully in my sleep, not screaming in terror like his victims."⁶

Whether it's Castro, Stalin, Hitler or some other notorious bad guy, we all look like angels in comparison. But the mention of such despots merely distracts us from our own desperate situation. When it comes to both *mishpat* and *tzadekah*, we all fall short of what God intended for us. Because we're all guilty of sin, we all deserve God's wrath.

⁵ Douglas Stuart, *Minor Prophets*, Word Biblical Commentary.

⁶ Attributed to Johan Norberg.

When it comes to talking about our shortcomings, we have clever ways of narrowing down God's expectations in order to exclude those areas in which we often fall short. Some love to talk about *tzadakah*, "righteousness," and draw attention to our own piety. We don't murder or steal or sleep around, and we're working on trying not to swear so much. Others love to talk about *mishpat*, "rectifying justice," and emphasize how often we give money to the poor and help out at the shelter, and how we're trying not to be so racist, and so on. By ignoring one or the other of these areas, we can go a long ways towards self-justification on the basis of our own good behavior. But whenever we talk about the full scope of God's justice—the way things ought to be both within our hearts and throughout our society—we discover how far short we have fallen before our holy, righteous and just God.

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus wrestled with the reason for his first advent. In John 12:27 he asked, "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this purpose I have come to this hour." What "hour" was Jesus talking about? In the Gospel of John, the "hour" was another way of talking about the Day of the Lord, specifically the first of two ultimate Days of the Lord. The 'hour' had come for Jesus to be lifted up, but not as King Jeroboam II was lifted up on a throne of splendor before all his followers. Jesus would be lifted up on Roman cross, publicly humiliated, tortured and executed for crimes he never committed. It was the first great Day of the Lord, when God so intervened in human affairs that he brought about a massive restoration of the brokenness in our world. Through Jesus' atoning death on the cross, everyone who believes in him, throughout all human history, can be assured of the forgiveness of their sins. On that Day of the Lord, Jesus took all our problems, all our difficulties, and all the devil's works onto himself. Then God poured out his wrath—the wrath that God was storing up for us—upon Jesus instead. The Lord of *mishpat* and *tzadakah* took on our punishment, so that we might receive God's mercy.

Someday Jesus will come again, and that day will be the final and ultimate Day of the Lord. On that day, Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will never end. As we look forward to that day, we do so with an awareness of both God's justice and his mercy. There is no need for any of us to suffer God's wrath on that great and terrible day of the Lord. By turning to Jesus now, but putting our faith in him today, we can be among those for whom Jesus died. The wrath reserved for us on the day of judgment can be already neutralized by Jesus' sacrificial death in our place. All we need to do is repent of our sins and give our hearts to him. That's why Jesus said in John 12:35-36, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." Jesus invites us all to take advantage of his light before the darkness overtakes us.

A DAY FOR PREPARATION

The Advent season is primarily a time of spiritual preparation. We all prepare for events that are important. If you celebrated Thanksgiving, chances are that you were involved in some degree of preparations, one way or another. Maybe you prepared for the big meal by cooking the turkey or by bringing something else to share. Or perhaps you prepared to host guests from out of town, as

we did, by tidying up the house before they came. Hopefully the work of preparation paid off; the time and energy invested made for a great Thanksgiving celebration.

For example, Phoebe Ngan, and Marvin and Stephanie Po put together a fabulous Thanksgiving meal at the RezHouse for internationals. Well over 50 people attended, coming from such far away places as China and Saudi Arabia. It was a tremendous amount of work to feed so many people. But the event was such a fabulous success that it made all the preparations worthwhile. Many of the guests said that it was their very first time sharing a meal with Christians. What a joy to be part of something like this!

There is nothing more important that we can do than to prepare to meet the Lord. He may come again soon, in which case we will all meet him together. Or he may continue in his patience, waiting for more people to come to faith in him, and we may meet him individually in death. Either way, the most important thing we can do is to prepare to meet him face to face.

Advent is one of two “penitential seasons” in the Christian liturgical year.⁷ Because God takes our sin so seriously, we have two penitential seasons before the two great festival seasons of the Christian calendar. Lent is the second penitential season, and it's the time when we prepare to remember Jesus' death *for us* on Good Friday. After Lent comes Eastertide, when we celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection. Just as Lent precedes Easter, so also Advent precedes Christmas. Advent is the time when we remember that Jesus left the peace and security and wealth and luxury and brightness of home in order to enter into our darkness, to be born into our poverty to experience our need and want and temptation. Advent is a month of watching and waiting, followed by two months of celebration through Christmas and Epiphany.

Observing these penitential seasons has never been easy, and it never will be. Christians will always be misunderstood during Advent and Lent. It's natural that when we turn away from the things the world loves, the world will feel judged and fight back. The world doesn't have time for penitence—for slowing down, giving up, letting go, and especially not eating, drinking or buying more stuff.

Nevertheless, we need a little Advent, right this very minute. Why? Because repentance always begins at home. Before we can take the splinter out of someone else's eye, it's time for personal log removal (Matthew 7:3-5). How can we invite people outside the church to draw near to God if we aren't near to him ourselves? How can we challenge the wealthy in our city to give generously to the poor if we aren't already giving sacrificially on our own?

How then can we make the most of Advent? By preparing to meet the Lord face-to-face. Here then are some very practical suggestions on how to make the most of this season.

First, if you haven't yet committed your life to Jesus, now is the perfect time for doing so. Jesus cares about you so much that he took God's wrath in your place. If you reject his free gift of love, you're not being a hero. There's nothing courageous about choosing to suffer punishment when it's unnecessary. Why not open your heart to Jesus and receive his gift of love instead?

⁷ Penitence is another way of talking about repentance, i.e. turning away from sin and brokenness in our lives.

Second, Jesus invites us to reach forward into the future and pull some of it back into our present. When Jesus returns, God's kingdom will be fully realized here in Washington and everywhere around the world. Jesus will wipe away every tear from our eyes and put everything to rights. As we wait for that great day, Jesus bids us pray "Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He calls us to be ambassadors of his kingdom, working for righteousness and justice in our own lives and communities. There is no reason why we have to sit idly and wait for our government to make things right for people on the margins. With the Lord's help, the church can do it with or without government assistance.

Think for a moment about what you would like to see change this Advent as you prepare to meet the Lord. When it comes to *tzadekah*, or "righteousness," is there something that you would like to give up or do without or grow or change? What personal area of sin is God calling you to lay before him this Advent? Write it down and then repent of it before the Lord.

Likewise, when it comes to *mishpat*, or "rectifying justice," what could you do this Advent to show God's love to people on the margins? Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." We are people of the light. We have the love of Christ. How is Jesus calling you to share his light and love this Advent in order to bring God's justice to widows, orphans, prisoners, immigrants, or the poor? How will you give of your money, time, talents, and influence in order to change the plight of people in need? Write it down and take it before the Lord.

Finally, as we prepare to meet the Lord, seeking righteousness and justice in our lives and our community, let's celebrate every victory within our community. Each individual act of resistance to the world is a victory for the larger body of Christ. Every hour stolen away in prayer and fasting, every financial gift, every effort to share the love of Christ with others is a sign of the Kingdom Come. Our aim is to become better known for our zeal for righteousness and justice than for all the other passing fancies that so often captivate our hearts.

"The hour has come for us to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed" (Rom 13:11-12).

"Let *mishpat* (justice) roll down like waters, and *tzadekah* (righteousness) like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).