

THE FATE OF THE EARTH

by Ray C. Stedman

Having just returned from the Middle East where I was able personally to observe many of the turbulent currents that are challenging the peace of the world in that area, I realize afresh why people are concerned about the fate of the earth. This title is borrowed from a book by the same name by Jonathan Schell. The book, which was published in 1982, describes in chilling detail what would happen if this country went through a nuclear war. It is a very grim and pessimistic account that offers little hope if such a holocaust should occur. President Jimmy Carter's remarks in his farewell address capture the essence of it: "The survivors, if any, would live in despair amid the poisoned ruins of a civilization that had committed suicide."

Our study in the fifth chapter of First Thessalonians also deals with the fate of the earth, but from God's point of view. Unlike the pessimism of the secular prophets, there is a strong note of hope amidst the darkness and judgment that it predicts. The closing verses of Chapter 4 dealt with the second coming (or *parousia*) of Christ. We learned there that Christians are not waiting for the judgments and wrath of God but for the coming of the Son of God, either at their personal death or breaking into time in the event described in 4:16:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. {1 Th 4:16-17 RSV}

The apostle now continues this same subject in Chapter 5. He introduces it with the word *but*. When you come upon the word *but* in Scripture, it means that you are turning a corner; the same subject will be covered but from a different perspective and direction.

I hope that you have learned to ignore the chapter divisions in the Bible. There are no such divisions in the original. Some unnamed clown has put them in, and at times they interrupt the thought, as they clearly do here. Beginning in Chapter 5, therefore, the apostle continues with the same thought as the closing verses of Chapter 4.

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. {1 Th 5:1-3 RSV}

The phrase "the times and the seasons" indicates that the apostle is coming to grips with the question of the time of the Lord's return. All of us seem to want a date to circle in the calendar, but Paul had taught the Thessalonians that they would not know that date precisely. But he says to them, "concerning the time you have no need to have anything written to you." That is because they had been reading in the Old Testament about the day of the Lord and the description and characteristics of that day were familiar to them.

This is the first mention in the letter of the phrase "the day of the Lord." As we have already seen, it is very important to understand that it is not just a single 24-hour day. Rather it is an extended length of time, covering a number of events over a period of probably seven years, the whole period being called the *parousia* or the "presence" of Christ. When Christ returns he will remain on earth for this lengthy period. Thus, the "day of the Lord" is a series of events, perhaps even extending into the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ that follows. Actually the phrase, "day of the Lord" refers to any period of time when God acts directly and unmistakably in human affairs. It may be in blessing, as in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, or it may be in judgment. It may be that the same event will be a judgment to some people and a blessing to others.

In this case, says Paul, "You do not need to have anyone tell you about the times and the seasons." That is also what Jesus had said. In that mysterious period of time when he was risen from the dead and appearing with his disciples on occasion and then disappearing again, during one of these appearances they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" {Acts 1:6 RSV}. They were asking, "Is this the time when you will fulfill the predictions of the prophets that Israel will be the chief of the nations and the Messiah will reign personally upon the earth?" Here is the Lord's remarkable answer to their question: "It is not for you to know times or seasons [the same phrase as here] which the Father has fixed by his own authority," {Acts 1:7 RSV}. In other words, only the Father knew the answer to their question. Then Jesus went on to outline to them the program that would affect them: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth," {Acts 1:8 RSV}.

We must understand that though we cannot name the precise date when the Lord will appear and begin the "day of the Lord," there are three characteristics of that day that we can look for and understand.

The first characteristic of the "day of the Lord," says Paul, is that it will come stealthily. It will come like a thief in the night.

Some time ago a family told me that while they were sleeping upstairs in their home one night someone entered their home and stole several items of value. That is the way a thief operates. He enters silently and unobtrusively and does his work.

That, says Paul, is the way the Lord will come. We hear these days about the new Stealth bomber which the Air Force is developing. The plane is designed in such a way that it cannot be detected by radar. It can come upon an enemy unexpectedly, without warning.

The Lord will come stealthily, says Paul, at a time when "peace and security" seem to prevail, when nothing out of the ordinary is expected. That is how the "day of the Lord" begins.

This is not just the Apostle Paul's idea. Jesus said the same thing in Luke 17:26, 27:

As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. [Is there something wrong about eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage? No, that is normal, everyday life. But, says Jesus, in the moment when everything seems to be proceeding normally, suddenly the destructive judgment of God will fall. And that judgment is introduced, as Jesus points out very clearly here, by the removal of the family of God from the earth:] until the day when Noah entered the ark, the flood came and destroyed them all. {Luke 17:26-27 RSV}

Jesus did not stop there. He went on to say,

Likewise as it was in the days of Lot -- they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built [normal, everyday life] but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom fire and brimstone rained from heaven and destroyed them all -- so will it be on the day when the Son of man is revealed. {Luke 17:28-30 RSV}

Notice how clearly our Lord indicates in both of the examples he uses that there is a quiet disappearance of the family of God first. Like a thief at work, silently and stealthily, the treasure is taken away. Then the judgment comes.

In Matthew 24, the famous Olivet Discourse, Jesus adds these words about that event.

Then 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. {Matt 24:40-41 RSV}

The parallel passage in Luke reads:

Two men will be asleep in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. {Luke 17:34 RSV}

The fact that two men are asleep means that it is night-time, and yet two women grinding at the mill do so in daylight. This indicates that this selective taking away happens all over the earth at once. When it is daytime at one place and night-time at another, one will be taken; others will be left.

Jesus then adds these words:

Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming [here Jesus also calls this a thief-like coming] he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Matthew 24:42-44 {RSV})

Scripture clearly teaches that the day of the Lord begins with the removal of God's people; then judgment breaks out on the earth.

Its second characteristic is that it is a terrible, destructive judgment. "Sudden destruction will come," says Paul. The Old Testament gives many warnings of this, as the Thessalonians had come to understand when they read descriptions of the day of the Lord. The prophecy of Joel, for instance, says this:

**Alas for the day!
For the day of the Lord is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. {Joel 1:15 RSV}**

**a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness! {Joel 2:2a RSV}**

**the heavens tremble.
The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining. {Joel 2:10b RSV}**

**For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible;
who can endure it? {Joel 2:11b RSV}**

Isaiah 2 says a word to the same effect:

**For the Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up and high. {Isa 2:12 RSV}**

**In that day men will cast forth
their idols of silver and their idols of gold,
which they made for themselves to worship,
to the moles and to the bats,
to enter the caverns of the rocks
and the clefts of the cliffs
from before the terror of the Lord,
and from the glory of His majesty,
when He rises to terrify the earth. {Isa 2:20-22 RSV}**

And again in the prophecy of Zephaniah;

**The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the mighty man cries aloud there.
A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,**

**a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities and
against the lofty battlements. {Zeph 1:14-15 RSV}**

All of this is summed up in the words which Jesus uttered on the Mount of Olives:

For then there will be great tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be, {Matt 24:21 RSV}

I do not like to preach on passages like that. I do not like even to read them, but they represent reality. The one thing that we need is to face exactly what God says is going to happen. Here is indeed the fate of the earth!

And, as a third characteristic, it is inescapable, says the apostle: "They shall not escape." He likens it to a woman in travail, one whose time for giving birth has come.

When our first daughter was born in Dallas, we were living in a trailer on the campus of Dallas Seminary. At 2 o'clock one morning (it always seems to happen at 2 in the morning) my wife indicated that the time had come for her to give birth. I put her in our old clunker of a car which promptly refused to start. We had to enlist the aid of the garbage collectors who were doing their rounds to push the car and get it started. A car that has to be pushed to start always heaves and jerks before the engine finally begins to run, so that by the time we arrived at the hospital the baby was well on its way! When a woman is in travail she cannot change her mind. It is too late for anything but to go through with childbirth.

That is what the apostle is highlighting. The world cannot escape the terrible judgments of God. That is a most sobering thought. The only way we can handle it is to find the means of escape provided in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this connection, the words of C. S. Lewis are particularly apt:

God is going to invade this earth in force, but what is the good of saying you are on his side then when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else, something it never entered your head to conceive, comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

It is very important that we understand that God's delay of this event is to give people a chance to see what is happening in their lives and to choose the redemption that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

After this terrible picture of gloom and darkness, Verse 4 turns another corner. It too begins with the word *but*.

**But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all sons of light and sons of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.
{1 Th 5:4-5 RSV}**

Here the apostle is indicating that there will be some who will not go through this time of trouble. There is a way of escape: This is the good news for this hour. Here are reasons he gives why true believers will not go through the tribulation. Also Verses 9 and 10 add further light to this:

For God has not destined us for wrath [the time of wrath], but to obtain salvation

through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him. {1 Th 5:9-10 RSV}

The only hope for any individual is to turn to the Lord Jesus and rely upon the value of his death and resurrection. That is what Paul calls becoming a child of light and not of darkness: "For you are all sons of light and sons of the day." In Colossians 1 he says: "We [believers] have been delivered from the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son," {cf, Col 1:13 RSV}

Also we have been given knowledge and truth. The Word of God tells us exactly what will happen and confirms it by the prophecies which have been fulfilled through the centuries. In this connection I often think of that wonderful promise in the third chapter of Revelation, given to the church of Philadelphia:

Because you have kept my word of patient endurance [i.e. the word of God; you have begun to run your life according to my word], I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world to try those who dwell upon the earth. {Rev 3:10 RSV}

For this reason Paul can say here, "God has not destined us for wrath." If we trust in the Lord Jesus, if we have been born again by the Spirit, if we believe his word and are growing by it we are not destined for wrath but to escape this terrible time of judgment, just as Noah and Lot escaped the judgments which fell in their day.

The second reason the apostle gives is that "we might live with Him." That is how he puts it here. "Whether we wake or sleep we might live with him." Those are also the wonderful words with which he closed Chapter 4: "so we shall always be with the Lord," {1 Th 4:17b RSV}

I want to tie this to Second Peter 1:16-18, a passage that is not usually connected with this truth. Here, Peter is referring to the time when he, James and John were invited by the Lord to accompany him to the Mount of Transfiguration.

Last week, our staff and elders were standing at the foot of Mt. Hermon, looking up at a spur of the mountain that bears the name Mt. Mizar, which I believe fits the description of the Scriptures as the place where Jesus was transfigured. There, on that "very high mountain," in the north of Israel, Jesus was transformed so that his garments glowed like the sun. And Peter, James and John saw him talking there with Moses and Elijah.

Peter refers to that event in his letter.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ [that is the word *parousia*, the coming, the "presence"] but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. {2 Pet 2:16 RSV}

Peter is saying that in the remarkable way of teaching that God has, this transfiguration scene was a preview of the *parousia* of the Lord; that Jesus would come and be related to people as he was related to those who were with him on the mountain in that day. Peter goes on to say:

For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we heard that voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. {2 Pet 1:17-18 RSV}

This is God's way of teaching us the relationship of believers in that day. Moses, who was present with Elijah, was a resurrected saint. Last week we stood on Mt. Nebo, where Moses looked out over the promised land but was forbidden to enter it because of his own failure at a certain point in the wilderness journey. Moses died on that mountain top and was buried by God; no one knows where. But he was raised from the dead and appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus. With him was Elijah, another Old Testament believer but one who never died but was translated. So in the second coming of our Lord there will be those who are raised from the dead joining with those who are alive and remain -- translated, as Paul

puts it in First Corinthians 15, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye ..." {1 Cor 15:51b-52a RSV}. These two, Moses and Elijah, represent those two kinds of saints. With them are three ordinary mortal men, Peter, James and John. So during the tribulation and during the Millennium that follows there will be resurrected saints and translated saints, living with mortal human beings upon the earth. This scene is a preview of that. And in the center, the focus of all attention, the risen, glorified, transfigured Lord himself.

That is God's picture of the fate of the earth. As we study these great passages and see what is coming in world affairs we can understand that the hope of the believer is to be with Christ; we have given our hearts to him already and he will claim us, body, soul and spirit, on that day.

What should be the result in our lives? The apostle addresses that in a very practical way.

So then let us not sleep, as other do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But, since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. {1 Th 5:6-11 RSV}

Here is some down-to-earth advice on how to live in this present day:

First, do not go to sleep. (That is a great word for Sunday morning as well!) But what Paul means by that is not only to keep awake in church, but do not begin to dream like the world around is dreaming. Do not fall into fantasies such as that the purpose of living is to try to gain wealth or fame. The purpose of life is to use your abilities and your time to fulfill the will of God; to find the adventure, excitement and drama of that instead of wasting time in self-indulgence. Do not go to sleep, says the apostle. Do not lose sight of reality. This is the hour when God is about to move on earth again. We ought to understand that and live in the light of that truth.

Then, second, "be sober." Paul is not saying we must be grim and humorless, that we must never take any recreation. He is urging that we take life seriously. Do not spend your time amusing yourself constantly. As the apostle puts it to the Ephesians, "Buy up the opportunity because the days are evil," {cf, Eph 5:16 RSV}. Take advantage of the contacts you have with people to help them, to reach out to them. Love, support, encourage and minister to one another. That is what the apostle is saying.

Two nights ago our staff boarded a plane in Chicago for the final leg of our return trip from Israel. It was late at night, and there was no dinner to be served, so the stewardesses had a lot of time on their hands. Several of our young pastors gathered with them in the back of the plane and began to talk with them about the Lord. The stewardesses were eager to hear. They had never heard anything like this before. One of them received the Lord and said she would be at church here in the next few days; another received a Bible. These young women were spiritually hungry and ready to listen. The pastors were tired; they had been flying for thirteen hours and had missed a lot of sleep. They had planned on sleeping from Chicago to San Francisco, but they were so caught up with the excitement and so turned on by the opportunity to talk with these stewardesses they never slept a wink. They felt fulfilled; they were experiencing tremendous enjoyment of life.

That is what the apostle is saying. Use your opportunities. Wake up to the opportunity of the day.

And finally, "encourage one another, and build one another up." It is so easy to lose sight of God's perspective. In a world that shoves God off to the side and is forever caught up in the things of the moment it is easy to lose perspective; to think that life ought to be beautiful and wonderful. It is so easy to slip into the attitude of the world that protests in the face of trial, "Why me? What have I done to deserve this?" That is why we need to encourage one another and help one another to understand that no job is insignificant when done as "unto the Lord," {Rom 14:8, Eph 5:22, Col 3:20 KJV}. No task is meaningless when it involves reaching out in help to someone else. God is not forgetful of our labors of love, the apostle tells us. Scripture says "do not to grow weary in well doing, for in due season you will reap if you faint not," {Gal 6:9 KJV}.

I received a very encouraging letter last week saying how much my teaching has meant. What a lift that

gave to my spirit!

That is what we ought to be doing to one another, encouraging one another, as the apostle says, "Build one another up, just as you are doing."

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