

How “Near” is the Day of the Lord?

³² “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; ³³ so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. ³⁴ Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away (Matthew 24.32-35).

¹ The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near (Revelation 1.1-3).

Introduction



The Day of the Lord by John Martin

The Day of the Lord is that period of time that encompasses God's wrath upon the earth, the return of Christ, the millennial kingdom, and the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. Most of the times it is mentioned, it referred to the period of God's wrath, the seven years Jesus called the Tribulation.

God has revealed *what* He will do, but *when* He will do it is shrouded in secrecy. *When* is the most closely guarded aspect of God's prophetic plan. The prophetic record of the Old Testament seemed to indicate God's wrath, His advent, and the establishment up of His kingdom on earth would occur in close proximity to one another.

John the Baptist began his ministry declaring the kingdom of God was "near" (Matthew 3.2). Shortly afterwards, the Lord proclaimed the same message (Matthew 4.17, 10.7). The Scriptures indicate the Twelve, as well as Paul, thought the Lord would return in their lifetime. Some maintain these prophetic events have occurred.¹ They base their case on several passages represented by the two above, e.g., "this generation will not pass away" and "things which must soon take place". Have these events truly taken place? If not, why not?

Context

The Day of the Lord and the establishment of God's kingdom on the earth are the two great themes of Jewish theology. The Messiah was revealed to have a direct involvement in bringing both to fulfillment. John the Baptist and Jesus preached the kingdom of God was "at hand" (Matthew 3.2, 4.17, 10.7; Mark 1.15). Peter, on the day of Pentecost, expected the Lord's wrath to fall soon upon the earth (Acts 2.14-21). He expected the Lord to return and establish the long-awaited kingdom upon the earth (Acts 3.17-21; cf. Matthew 6.10). Was Peter wrong to think this? The answer from the prophetic program was "no." But there *was* a catch.

The Vocabulary of Nearness: Witness of the Old Testament

Passage	Citation	Date (B.C.)
<p>Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and it will come as destruction from the Almighty.</p> <p>Blow a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm on My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; Surely it is near,</p> <p>Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.</p>	Joel 1.15, 2.1, 3.14	9 th c.
<p>Wail, for the day of the LORD is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty.</p>	Isaiah 13.6	8 th c.
<p>Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near, for the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests.</p> <p>Near is the great day of the LORD, Near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly.</p>	Zephaniah 1.7, 14	7 th c.
<p>For the day is near, even the day of the LORD is near; It will be a day of clouds, A time of <i>doom</i> for the nations.</p>	Ezekiel 30.3	6 th c.
<p>For the day of the LORD draws near on all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head.</p>	Obadiah 1.15	6 th c.

Each of the above Scriptures describes the Day of the Lord as “near.” The Hebrew word used is □□□□□□. It means that which is

near in place or time. Zephaniah wrote it was not only near but coming “very quickly” (הֵרֵב וְהָיָה מְהֵרָה). This prophecy was repeated throughout the 9th-6th centuries. The obvious question is, “If Joel wrote the Day of the Lord was near in the 9th century B.C., what did that mean?” The prophets continued to proclaim the Day of the Lord was near but it had not taken place by the time of Jesus. Over 800 years elapsed from Joel until John the Baptist. How did the Jews understand this prophecy and how are we to understand its meaning? For more clues, let us examine “nearness” in the New Testament.

The Vocabulary of Nearness: Witness of the New Testament

Passage	Citation
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.	Matthew 3.2
From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.	Matthew 4.7
And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’	Matthew 10.7
and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”	Mark 1.15
and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’	Luke 10.9
Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.	Luke 10.11
While they were listening to these things, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately.	Luke 19.11
“So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near.	Luke 21.31

The words used in the above passages for “near” or “at hand” are [ἐγγίζω](#) (verb) or [ἐγγύς](#) (adverb). It means to draw or come near in time or place. The straightforward meaning of these passages is that the long-anticipated kingdom of God was at hand. Why? The King was present in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was ready to establish His kingdom for Israel.

Prophecy	Fulfillment
Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16.28).	Matthew 17.1-9
And Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power” (Mark 9.1).	Mark 9.2-8
But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God (Luke 9.27).	Luke 9.28-26

The above passages indicated some of the Twelve would be alive and witness the Lord’s return and the establishment of His kingdom. The challenge of these passages is to understand when the prophecy was or will be fulfilled. While our investigation is incomplete, even a novice Bible student can recognize the Tribulation has not occurred, the Lord has not returned, and the kingdom of God has not been established. Why? Jesus indicated when He returns almost the entire human race will have been destroyed (Matthew 24.22). Furthermore, lions are not eating straw, lambs are not relaxing with wolves, universal peace does not exist, and the Lord is not ruling the world from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2.2-4, 11.1-9; Zechariah 14.8-11). These are the things that describe the world of Christ’s return. How then, do we explain the Lord’s words in these passages?

In each Gospel, an account of Jesus' Transfiguration follows immediately after these passages. In the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John witnessed the Lord's glory. When He returns, He will not be garbed in humiliation. He will come with might and in glory. To see the King glorified was to see the kingdom. Peter, James, and John witnessed His glory as a "preview" event of His return. Thus, the prophecy was fulfilled with the Transfiguration, but it *could have been* fulfilled much more extensively.

"This Generation"

Passage	Citation
<p>³⁴ "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, ³⁵ so that upon you may fall <i>the guilt of</i> all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.</p> <p>³⁶ Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.</p>	<p>Matthew 23.34-36</p>
<p>³² "Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near;</p> <p>³³ so, you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, <i>right</i> at the door.</p> <p>³⁴ Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.</p>	<p>Matthew 24.32-34</p>

<p>²⁸ “Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.²⁹ Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, <i>right</i> at the door. ³⁰ Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.</p>	<p>Mark 13.28-30</p>
<p>²⁹ Then He told them a parable: “Behold the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. ³¹ So you also, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all things take place.</p>	<p>Luke 21.29-32</p>

In each of the above passages, Jesus stated “this generation” would not end until the Day of the Lord occurred and the Lord returned. What did Jesus mean by “this generation?” The word “generation” is [γενεά](#). It means a race of people, people living during a particular time, an age. In this case, the most straightforward meaning is of people living at a particular time. The next question becomes, what does “this” mean? Did Jesus mean the Jews of His day or something else? Before addressing this question, let us examine some more passages.

Other Passages

Mark 14.61-2 reads:

⁶¹ *But He kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”* ⁶² *And Jesus said, “I am;*

and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”

Did Jesus mean the high priest would live to see His coming? It appeared so. But further analysis reveals His answer was cryptic. John wrote everyone (alive or dead) will see Him:

Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen (Revelation 1.7).

“Nearness” in Revelation

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place (τάχος); and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John,	Revelation 1.1
Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near (ἐγγύς).	Revelation 1.3
Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.	Revelation 2.25
I am coming quickly (ταχύ); hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.	Revelation 3.11
⁶ And he said to me, “These words are faithful and true”; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place (τάχος). ⁷ “And behold, I am coming quickly (ταχύ). Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.”	Revelation 22.6-7

And he *said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near (ἐγγύς).	Revelation 22.10
“Behold, I am coming quickly (ταχύ), and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.	Revelation 22.12
He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming quickly (ταχύ).” Amen.Come, Lord Jesus.	Revelation 22.20

Each of the Revelation passages indicated Jesus would return soon. He warned the Thyatira and Philadelphia assemblies to hold fast until He came. In Revelation 1.1, 6, τάχος is used and in Revelation 3.11, 22.7, 12, 20, ταχύ is found. Both come from [ταχύς](#), one being used as a noun and the other as an adverb. Both words convey the sense of quickness, speed, and without delay. Has Jesus returned as some teach or is there a better Scriptural interpretation of these passages?

The Wonderful World of Maybe

As noted above, God has cloaked the timing of His strategic plans in great secrecy. Jesus said about His coming:

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone (Matthew 24.36).

The other thing Jesus stated about His return was that it depended upon Israel’s repentance. He said:

³⁷ *“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. ³⁸ Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! ³⁹ For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matthew 23.37-39)*

This statement complemented John the Baptist's words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3.2) as well as Jesus' own statement (Matthew 4.7). From Matthew 23.37-39 we learn that His return and the establishment of the kingdom was *contingent upon Israel's repentance*. He would not, indeed, could not, return apart from Israel's repentance.

Peter understood this. In his message to the Jews following Jesus' resurrection, he declared on the day of Pentecost:

³² This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.³³ Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. ³⁴ For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, ³⁵ until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.'" ³⁶ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." ³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2.36-38).

Thus, Peter declared the Lord will remain seated at His Father's right hand *until* Israel repents.³ When they do, He will arise, destroy His enemies, establish His kingdom (Psalm 68.1; Isaiah 42.13).

Peter reaffirmed this message in his second sermon concerning

the healing of the lame man at the Temple:

¹¹ While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement. ¹² But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. ¹⁴ But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. ¹⁷ "And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. ¹⁸ But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. ¹⁹ Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; ²⁰ and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time (Acts 3.11-21).

The "times of refreshing" and the "period of restoration" were expressions that described God's kingdom on earth (Matthew 6.10). Peter stated explicitly that Jesus would return *if* the nation repented.

Peter expected the Day of the Lord to follow soon after the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Because of this, he quoted Joel 2.28-32 in its entirety:

¹⁴ But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. ¹⁵ For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; ¹⁶ but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ Even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹ 'And I will grant wonders in the sky above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. ²⁰ 'The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. ²¹ 'And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Acts 2.14-21).

Joel's prophecy was fulfilled partially. God gave His Holy Spirit accompanied by prophecy, visions, and dreams. These manifestations were indicators of kingdom life. But signs in the heavens and earth of blood, fire, vapor, smoke—the sun being darkened and the moon looking like blood—did *not* occur (cf. Matthew 24.29-31).

Understanding the Kingdom Offer

Israel is the center of gravity of prophecy. The focus of God's great promise of the Day of the Lord—His wrath, His return, and His rule—was Israel. When God called Abraham and established His covenant with him (Genesis 12.1-3) He

initiated a new order. In this new order, He would no longer reveal Himself to all mankind but would reveal Himself through a special people, His covenant people, the Jews. All divine blessings would be channeled and mediated through them. God's blessing to Israel depended upon their obedience to God which culminated in their acceptance of the Messiah. The kingdom, their object of longing, depended upon their acceptance of Him. His acceptance required the nation's repentance—the message John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and the Eleven proclaimed. The prophecies proclaimed by Israel's prophets and elucidated by the Lord in His Olivet discourse on end-times required national repentance.

Had the nation repented, "this generation" would have been the Jews of Jesus' day. They could have fulfilled the prophecy. Since they refused, "this generation" refers to a future generation who *will* repent. If the nation had repented, Jesus' words, "some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" would have meant the Jews of His day would have witnessed His actual return, not just the preview Peter, James, and John witnessed in the Transfiguration. The same may be said of the high priest whom Jesus addressed at His trial. Had the nation repented he could have lived to witness the return of Christ in glory. The kingdom of God was indeed near: the King was present. The offer of the kingdom was genuine.

Peter recognized the Jews had committed a horrible crime in initiating the murder of their Messiah. But He had risen from the dead! Hope for the nation remained and because of this, he admonished them to repent. If they had responded, the Lord would have returned and established His kingdom. Israel's kingdom hopes could have been realized.

What Did "Nearness" Mean For Israel's Prophets?

What are we to make of the Old Testament prophets who declared the Day of the Lord was "near" as noted in the chart above?

The only reasonable answer is to interpret the language in terms of God's perspective. Time is a strange property. God is eternal. But eternality does not mean a long time. It is an absence of time: timelessness. Time does not exist in eternity. It has no meaning. We cannot comprehend this for we are physical creatures bound by the laws of a physical universe. Physicists tell us time is a property of matter. Our world consists of length, height, width, and time. God is beyond such limits for He is Spirit. When God involves Himself in the realm of the physical world, He can experience it differently than we. The Psalmist recorded a prayer of Moses: "For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night" (Psalm 90.4). Echoing the Psalmist, Peter wrote, "But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day" (2 Peter 3.8). Therefore, 2,800 years ago, when Joel first proclaimed the day of the Lord was near, it was less than three days ago for God. That *is* near if you have a God watch.

"What If" and the Church

The reader may wonder what would have happened had Israel repented. Such a question opens the door to the hypothetical and speculative. If they had repented would Jesus have gone to the cross? The answer is yes. That was foreordained (Genesis 3.15; Isaiah 53.1-12; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4). He had to die for mankind's sins. He had to rise from the dead (Psalm 16.10). Psalm 2.1-3 prophesied:

¹ *"Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? ² The kings of the earth take their stand And the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, ³ "Let us tear their fetters apart And cast away their cords from us!"*

The prophecy stated Jew and Gentile would work in concert against the Messiah. But the prophecy provided no details regarding the role of each. Since the Jews refused to repent, they took the leading role in killing the Messiah. They took Him to Pilate and demanded he execute Him. Thus, they bear the primary responsibility. But had the Jews repented, the Romans would have taken the lead. Jesus would have been seen as a threat to Rome's imperial power and would have been crucified.

What if the Jews had repented after Jesus' resurrection as Peter hoped? Had this occurred, the Tribulation (all of Joel's prophecy) would have taken place. One of the Julio-Claudian Caesars (probably Nero) would have become the Antichrist and the Lord would have returned to set up His kingdom. It *could* have happened but the Lord knew it *wouldn't* due to His foreknowledge. Nevertheless, the offer of the kingdom was genuine.

Perhaps the reader may wonder where the Church, the body of Christ, is in all this? The Church, the body of Christ, is never mentioned in the Old Testament. It was not part of God's prophetic program. As far as Jewish theology was concerned, the Church did not exist. We also find no mention of the Church in the Gospels. Peter only knew about God's prophetic plan for Israel. He knew nothing of the Church. He addressed only Jews in Acts. Would the Church have come into being if Israel had repented?

According to God's prophetic plan, ALL Gentile blessing had to come through Israel and their Messiah. God initiated this plan in His call of Abraham (Genesis 12.1-3). The fulfillment of God's prophetic plan anticipated Jewish success—Jewish acceptance of their Messiah since God had revealed no provision to bless Gentiles apart from Israel. But God, in His grace and mercy, chose not to initiate the Tribulation, even in the face of continued Jewish rejection. Instead, He delayed it, saved Saul of Tarsus, and created the Church, the body of

Christ. God delayed His judgment, the Day of the Lord, and initiated a new program through which He could bless Gentiles—in spite of Jewish rejection of the Messiah.

Some may argue this means the Church was an “afterthought” of God. Such thinking reveals a lack of understanding of God’s sovereignty. God knows all but gives man the freedom to choose. God knew Israel would reject Him but gave the nation a choice. But He knew what choice they would make. He also knew He would save Paul to become the apostle of the Gentiles and that He would reveal a new program—the Church, the body of Christ—through this apostle. This plan may be compared to God’s choice of Abraham to create the Jewish people and His choosing Moses to give them the Law. God’s creation of the Jewish people and later giving them the Law was no “afterthought” but all part of His amazing plan.

Conclusion

The genius and goodness of God is that He is sovereign, knowing the end from the beginning, but gives man the freedom to choose. He gave national Israel the freedom to accept or reject Him. He gives each of us that freedom. His work on the cross solved the problem of sin and death. He removed the barrier. The only thing between man and God is Christ’s work. The only thing between death and eternal life is the person of Christ. We can have life and a relationship with God by believing Christ died for us and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). This is grace. In light of this, Paul exclaimed:

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the LORD, or who became His counselor? ³⁵ Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? ³⁶ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the

glory forever. Amen (Romans 11.33-36).

¹ Those who make these claims are known as Preterists and their theology Preterism. The name comes from the Latin praeter denoting what is “past” or “beyond.” Adherents of Preterism claim all or a majority of Bible prophecy was fulfilled by AD 70.

² See the author’s study, [Theology of the Old Testament](#).

³ The Lord will vacate His seat at the Father’s right hand for a split second to receive His Church, the body of Christ, to Himself, at the Rapture. At that point, God’s prophetic plan, which is centered upon Israel but has been on hold can resume.

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