

The "Day of the Lord"

1 Thessalonians 5

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In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul dealt with the relationship of the resurrection to the rapture. The dead in Christ will rise first, then the living will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Paul continued in chapter 5 by addressing the question of when they might expect the rapture and resurrection to come.

1 Thess. 5:1-2

1 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you.

2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.

Notice Paul was placing the rapture in the "Day of the Lord." This is an extremely important point. Here Paul shifted from describing the events surrounding the rapture to speaking about when the rapture might come. And he referred them again to something they already knew, "*yourselves know perfectly...*" The "Day of the Lord" was coming as a "thief in the night."

Paul used a phrase that was familiar to these Christians. The "Day of the Lord" is found several times in the Old Testament, always in the context of Christ's coming to destroy the enemies of Israel, (see: Isa. 13:6-13, Joel 3:9-17, Zech. 14). This is exactly what Revelation 19 records as the "battle of Armageddon."

The nature of the "Day of the Lord" is crucial to understanding this passage. It is also critical to any foundational understanding of eschatology in general. Pretribulationists claim the "Day of the Lord" includes the alleged pretribulation rapture and the entire tribulation. This allows them to reconcile 1 Thessalonians 5 with pretribulationism, since Paul instructed believers to be watching for the "Day of the Lord," (1 Thess. 5:1-6). If the "Day of the Lord" comes after the tribulation, as every Old Testament occurrence seems to indicate, then Christians must still be here at the end of the tribulation in order to watch for that day.

Much has been written by pretribulationists trying to stretch the Day of the Lord forward to include the entire tribulation and supposed pretribulation rapture. Comparisons of similar themes, such as wrath, judgment, etc. have been offered as

evidence. Yet, no one has provided any biblical requirement supporting making them synonymous. None of the Old Testament passages support this conclusion. It comes only from a preconceived assumption of a pretribulation rapture superimposed on the Thessalonian passage. Their theory is a product of reverse engineering of the Scriptures in order to get the desired outcome rather than applying sound rules of interpretation. The fact is, there are passages that forbid the "Day of the Lord" from overlapping the tribulation. The two are mutually exclusive.

First, throughout the Old Testament, a catastrophic sign is associated with the coming of the "Day of the Lord." The darkening of the sun and moon will herald that day. [See: Isaiah 13:9,10, Isaiah 24:19-23, Joel 3:13-15]. Here is one example.

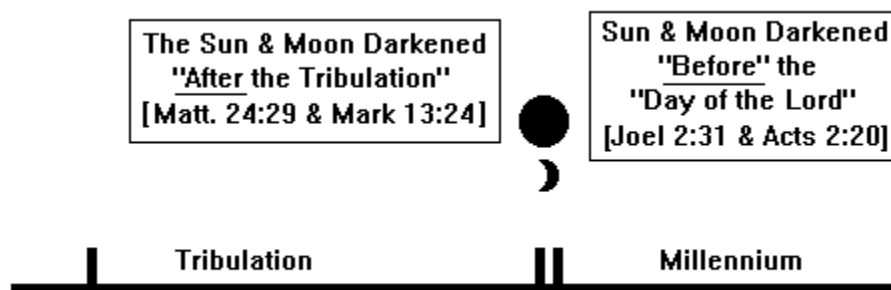
Joel 2:31

31 The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.

Matt 24:29

*29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days **the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light**; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

These verses establish a clear sequence of events. They place the cosmic signs, the darkening of the sun and moon, **between** the end of the tribulation and the beginning of the "Day of the Lord."



This absolutely forbids any overlapping of the tribulation into the "Day of the Lord." They are distinct events. No other interpretation is possible without doing violence to these passages.

Secondly, the very first time the "Day of the Lord" is mentioned in the Bible, the text clearly forbids associating it with the tribulation. Isaiah two describes the "Day of the Lord" with the following words:

Isa 2:10-19

10 Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust, From the terror of the LORD And the glory of His majesty.

*11 The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, The haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, **And the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day.***

*12 For **the day of the LORD** of hosts Shall come upon everything proud and lofty, Upon everything lifted up — And it shall be brought low —*

13 Upon all the cedars of Lebanon that are high and lifted up, And upon all the oaks of Bashan;

14 Upon all the high mountains, And upon all the hills that are lifted up;

15 Upon every high tower, And upon every fortified wall;

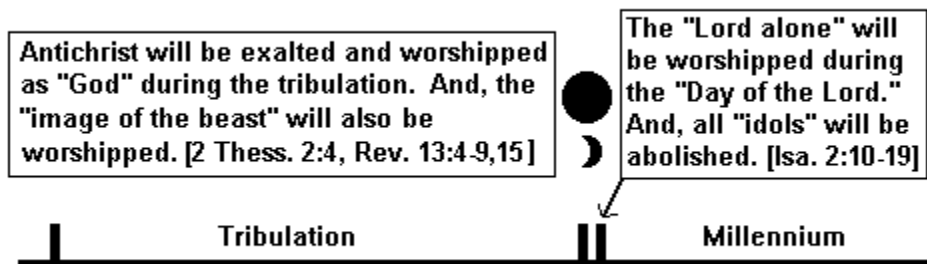
16 Upon all the ships of Tarshish, And upon all the beautiful sloops.

*17 The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, And the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; **The LORD alone will be exalted in that day,***

18 But the idols He shall utterly abolish.

19 They shall go into the holes of the rocks, And into the caves of the earth, From the terror of the LORD And the glory of His majesty, When He arises to shake the earth mightily.

Twice these verses indicate that **the Lord alone** will be exalted in the "Day of the Lord." This is an exclusive statement. **No one else can be exalted or worshipped during the "Day of the Lord."** Yet, during the tribulation, the Antichrist will be worshipped as God. (See: Rev. 13:3-8,14 & 2 Thess. 2:3,4) And, his image will be worshipped as well. Isaiah's statements about the Lord alone being exalted, and the idols being abolished during the "Day of the Lord," forbid any overlapping with the tribulation and reign of Antichrist.



The celestial sign, and the statements in Isaiah two, absolutely forbid stretching the "Day of the Lord" forward to include the tribulation, as pretribulationists attempt to do in order to reconcile 1 Thessalonians 5 with a pretribulation rapture.

The meaning of the phrase "Day of the Lord" holds the key to the interpretation of Paul's instructions to believers in 1 Thessalonians. The meaning of 1 Thessalonians 4:13 - 5:9 is entirely dependent on the meaning of this phrase. There is no question the rapture and the coming of the "Day of the Lord" are firmly connected by Paul in this passage. He uses the term "Day of the Lord" as a synonym for the rapture. **Notice Paul instructed Christians to be watching for the coming of the "Day of the Lord."** And, as we have just demonstrated, the "Day of the Lord" is after the tribulation. **Therefore, Christians must pass through the tribulation in order to watch for the "Day of the Lord."** The rapture that Paul referred to is after the tribulation.

1 Thess 5:2-6

*2 For you yourselves know perfectly that **the day of the Lord** so comes as a thief in the night.*

3 For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape.

*4 **But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief.***

5 You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.

*6 Therefore **let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.***

Since he instructed Christians to watch for the "Day of the Lord," and, as we have seen, that day comes after the tribulation, Paul was simply confirming Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse. There is nothing here to suggest new revelation of a secret pre-trib rapture. In fact the opposite is true. Paul said in verse 2 that they already knew this perfectly. He was simply refreshing their memory. Yes, in chapter 4 Paul gave them some new revelation. He placed the timing of the resurrection just before the catching up of the living. This exact sequence was previously unknown to them. But, in chapter 5, his comment about their being already familiar with the coming of the Day of the Lord, indicates he was now pointing them back to something already revealed.

How did the Thessalonian believers "*know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a **thief in the night?***" It was because they were familiar with Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse! The idea of Christ's coming as a "*thief in the night*" was originated by Jesus Himself when describing His coming. After describing His coming in glory "*immediately after the tribulation,*" Jesus said to His disciples:

Matt 24:42-44

42 "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.

43 "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour **the thief would come**, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

44 "Therefore **you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.**

Obviously, Paul was referring to Jesus' teaching! His reminding them of Jesus' "thief in the night" illustration shows that he was confirming the chronology Christ gave. The following table proves this conclusively. He was simply repeating Jesus' instructions to His disciples. In effect, he was applying the teaching of Jesus to the Thessalonians, connecting their "watching" for the rapture with Jesus' instructions for His disciples to be watching for His coming "immediately after the tribulation."

Paul Referred to Jesus	Jesus	Paul
Coming of the Lord from heaven	Matt 24:30 "... they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."	1 Thess. 4:16 "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven..."
Angel(s)	Matt. 24:31 "...He shall send forth His angels..."	1 Thess. 4:16 "with the voice of the archangel..."
Trumpet blast	Matt. 24:31 "...with the sound of a trumpet..."	1 Thess. 4:16 "...with the trumpet of God"
Catching up of the living	Matt. 24:31 "...they shall gather together His elect..."	1 Thess. 4:17 "...shall be caught up together..."
Thief in the night	Matt. 24:43 "...if the goodman ...had know in what watch the thief would come..."	1 Thess. 5:1,2 "...so cometh as a thief in the night."
Warning against "sleeping"	Mark 13:36 "lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping."	1 Thess. 5:6 "...let us not sleep as do others"
Warning against "drunkenness"	Luke 21:34 "take heed ... lest your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness"	1 Thess. 5:6-8 "be sober...they that are drunken are drunken in the night. ...be sober"
"Watching" for Christ's coming	Mark 13:35-37 "Watch ye therefore ... What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch."	1 Thess. 5:6 "let us watch..."

There is no question that Paul referred his readers to Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse, which only teaches a posttribulation coming of Christ, to answer their questions about the rapture. This is overwhelming evidence that Paul taught a posttribulation rapture. His use of the phrase "Day of the Lord," which other Scriptures place after the tribulation, to describe the rapture, makes it impossible to reconcile this passage with pretribulationism. Once again, we have every reason to connect Paul's teaching on the rapture to Jesus' teaching on the second coming. Nothing here excludes this linkage. And as the table above illustrates, there is much evidence of this connection. Therefore, the natural inference is Paul was simply building on Jesus' teaching, and was encouraging the Thessalonian believers to be watching for Jesus' coming after the tribulation!

Here is another reason the "Day of the Lord" cannot be stretched forward to include the tribulation in this passage. Paul wrote, "*when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and **they shall not escape.***" Notice it is those who are surprised by the sudden coming of the Day of the Lord that encounter sudden destruction with **NO ESCAPE** possible! In a pretribulation scheme, where the Day of the Lord is supposed to be the beginning of the tribulation, many of those who enter the tribulation, and consequently are among those surprised by the coming of the Day of the Lord (tribulation), are still saved to become the multitude of "tribulation saints" according to pretribulationists. Therefore, Paul's statement that "they will not escape" is necessarily false if the pretribulation theory is true! Paul's point is clearly that all those who are "in darkness" and who are surprised by the coming of the Day of the Lord will encounter "sudden destruction" and none of them will escape! This is precisely what Paul also indicates in 2 Thessalonians 1, as we will see in the next article.