

'Unless Those Days Were Shortened . . . '

by David C. Grabbe

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In Jesus' foretelling of the time just before His return, He makes a statement that often springs to mind as mankind continues to develop new weapons and other technologies that threaten the survival of humanity:

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. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened. (Matthew 24: 21-22)

This passage describes a time of greatest tribulation (which implies "pressure"), including persecution and martyrdom. Jeremiah 30:7 uses similar maximal language: "Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob's trouble . . ." Similarly, Daniel 12:1 says, "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. . ." What lies ahead will be the very worst of times. They will be so perilous that, unless God had put a limit on the number of the days, no flesh would be saved. Yet for the sake of the elect, a limit has already been placed.

End-Time Threat

But just what is the overarching threat at the end?

The dawn of the Atomic Age appeared to provide an answer to this question, as mankind developed weapons capable of awesome destruction. This threat intensified through the Cold War, with its continual menace of nuclear annihilation. In years past, prophecy enthusiasts frequently recounted that enough nuclear weapons existed to destroy all life on the planet many times over.

'Unless Those Days Were Shortened . . . ' by David C. Grabbe (<https://www.cgg.org>)

While the threat of mutually assured destruction seems less urgent with the collapse of the Soviet Union, humanity has also developed other potential civilization-enders. Scientists have been constructing genetically modified organisms—some pathogenic—for decades, presuming to know better than the Creator how the genetic code should operate. Some believe the COVID-19 virus (SARS-CoV-2) resulted from a gain-of-function experiment that later escaped the laboratory despite its containment protocols.

More recently, military scientists have been combining artificial intelligence with advanced weaponry, with little regard for the inherent risks. Each new technological advancement becomes fodder for science fiction authors and screenwriters to explore the expanding ways humankind could wipe itself out. Some of the scenarios seem quite plausible.

Even so, viewing “no flesh would be saved” through the lens of current events and risky human advancement neglects a significant perspective: a biblical interpretation. Luke’s account of this portion of Christ’s Olivet Prophecy supplies an overlooked detail that shows the threat to humanity may not be what we expect:

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.
(Luke 21:20-24)

Luke’s account contains the same elements as Matthew’s, including the abomination of desolation (Matthew 24:15), the warnings to flee (Matthew 24:16-18), and the woe pronounced on those who are pregnant and nursing (Matthew 24:19).

However, Luke's version also gives us a general geographical setting: Jerusalem and Judea. It talks about "the land"—the Land of Promise—as well as "this people," indicating the Jews specifically and perhaps Israelites in general. This detail does not mean there will not be trouble or tribulation elsewhere. The epicenter of the turmoil, though, will be Jerusalem and its environs, and the "troublers" in general will be Gentiles.

Luke's passage also fills in some details that tie this time of great tribulation directly to Jacob's Trouble. Verse 24 describes death in warfare and Jacob's offspring being carried away into other nations. It also says that Jerusalem will be given over to the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled, which parallels Revelation 11:2: Gentiles "will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months." Non-Israelite peoples will trample Jerusalem, and whatever worship of the God of Abraham that will be taking place will be stopped (part of the foretold "abomination of desolation").

Days of Vengeance

But the commonly overlooked detail appears in Luke 21:22: "For these are the *days of vengeance*, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (emphasis ours throughout). The events mentioned are the culmination—the comprehensive fulfillment—of what has been spoken of before by the prophets. Jesus calls this time "the days of vengeance." This vengeance is not arbitrary, like human vengeance, but the fulfillment of previously given divine warnings.

Putting Matthew 24 and Luke 21 side-by-side, Luke's phrase, "the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled," is parallel to the statement that "unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved." Viewed in this light, the threat does not look like a lab experiment gone wrong, nor like a weapons system identifying man as a threat. Certainly, these things pose great dangers, but the Word of God signals that the overwhelming end-time peril is "vengeance" rather than technology.

As it says, these days of vengeance have been written about before. We must therefore identify what vengeance has been prophesied to understand why no flesh would survive unless God had placed limits.

A review of the prophecies regarding “vengeance” shows that they are overwhelmingly about *God’s* vengeance! Today’s anemic nominal Christianity shies away from divine attributes such as vengeance, yet the Bible’s writers mention it frequently and even praise it (see Deuteronomy 32:35-36, 41-42; Psalm 94:1-7; 99:8; 149:7; Isaiah 34:8; 47:3; 61:2; Jeremiah 46:10).

A critical part of understanding the future “days of vengeance” is found in one of the Blessings and Curses chapters:

And I will bring a sword against you that will execute the vengeance of the covenant; when you are gathered together within your cities I will send pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy. (Leviticus 26:25)

This divine promise brings in the reason for God’s vengeance: unfaithfulness to the covenant. God’s covenantal relationship with the children of Israel—including the Jews—is the basis for the coming days of vengeance. Put simply, it is because the nations of Israel and Judah have turned away from God that He “will bring a sword against [them].” He views the wanton violation of His covenant (through breaking His commandments) as a breach of contract and an attack on His mercy and favor. Thus, He will avenge Himself through punishing those who despise His commands (see Leviticus 26:14-17).

Throughout biblical history, God sends Gentile nations as instruments of His justice against Jacob’s descendants. However, He then also judges those Gentiles because their hearts are evil. This repeated scriptural pattern begins to show how “no flesh”—neither Israelite nor Gentile—would survive the days of vengeance because the iniquity of mankind will be so full that *every* nation—*all* flesh—will more than deserve annihilation.

Precedents and Prophecies

God—not technology—is the threat to mankind at the end, both to the Israelites and the Gentiles. This conclusion may sound shocking, but the Bible contains precedents. God wiped out the pre-Flood world because of its

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wickedness and violence. *All* flesh was destroyed, save Noah and his family (see Genesis 6:12-13, 17; 7:21). God threatened to wipe out Israel and start over with Moses after the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32:10), and He was also ready to consume the whole nation upon Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16:21, 45).

Thus, there are precedents and prophecies of near annihilation. What is critical to understand, however, is that God's prophesied vengeance is not one-sided. On one hand, the prophecies foretell His vengeance against His own people because of their rebellion (Isaiah 1:21-24; 35:4; 59:17). But other prophecies point to His vengeance on other nations that have done wickedly, especially in oppressing His people (Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 79:5-10; Isaiah 46:10; Jeremiah 50:15; 50:28; 51:6-11; 51:56; Ezekiel 25:17; Joel 3:9-16; Revelation 18:20), nations like Edom, the descendants of Esau (Isaiah 34:8; 63:4; Ezekiel 25:14).

In short, the time when mankind's survival hangs in the balance parallels the prophesied time of divine vengeance in the lead-up to Christ's return. At that time, He will take His vengeance against all flesh, first Israelite and then Gentile. We see this most clearly in Zechariah 14:1-4:

Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, but the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. . . .

Notice that first God gathers all the nations to battle against Jerusalem, and the city is taken. Half of it goes into captivity. But after an unspecified time, God then fights against those same nations. Mankind's iniquity and lawlessness will be so great, and God's justified wrath so intense, that unless He had shortened those days, no flesh would survive His vengeance.

Jesus indirectly foretells His return with vengeance in His inaugural message in His hometown synagogue. He quotes a Jubilee-themed Messianic

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prophecy from Isaiah 61, yet there is a notable absence because His quote is incomplete:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Here, Jesus gives the reason for His first coming, but He stops His quotation short of what His Jewish audience expected the Messiah to do—and which He *will* do at His second coming:

. . . And the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.” (Isaiah 61:2-3)

This passage agrees with the other prophecies: God’s day of vengeance is coming. For those who are in mourning because of the spiritual condition of the nations (thus showing their alignment with God’s standard), God will provide comfort and lift the spirit of heaviness. In this, Christ’s second coming will also be like a Jubilee as His captives are freed and His people return to the Land of Promise in a stunning second exodus. But for those whose works deny God, there will be a time of divine vengeance unlike anything except the flood of Noah’s day.

New Testament Prophecies

Another New Testament prophecy of God’s vengeance is found in II Thessalonians 1:6-10:

. . . since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus

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Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

This prophecy speaks of a time when the gospel of the Kingdom will have been preached in all the world (Matthew 24:14; see Revelation 14:6). As a result, nobody will be able to claim ignorance of God and His way. Paul says here that Christ will take vengeance on those who do not *obey* the gospel, and their destruction will be eternal.

We can correlate this with what Paul told the Athenians in Acts 17:30-31:

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.

Paul says that, earlier in history, God was willing to overlook ignorance, but *now*—beginning some 2,000 years ago—He commands all humanity worldwide to repent. Christ's resurrection, he points out, is an absolute sign that a day of judgment is coming, and the One whom God raised will be the Judge. His resurrection demonstrates that He can return to complete the second half of His ministry, particularly the day of vengeance. This significant detail of Christ's resurrection seems to be overlooked in a typical Easter sunrise service!

Paul's words here do not mean that God is calling everyone, nor is He requiring perfection in people to whom He has not given His Spirit. But when we combine this prophecy with Romans 1:18-23, it means that mankind has enough information about the Creator God to be without excuse. After the dramatic preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God at the end time, humans around the world will be even more "without excuse." God will be fully justified in taking vengeance on those portions of His creation that obstinately refuse to hear and submit to the Creator and reigning King.

God's Vengeance and Wrath in Revelation

The book of Revelation vividly illustrates the awesome destruction that lies ahead as Jesus Christ redeems what belongs to Him and puts down all opposition. Revelation also makes mention of God's future avenging:

- » During the time of the Fifth Seal, the martyrs are shown as saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and *avenge our blood* on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10)
- » "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for *God has avenged you on her!*" (Revelation 18:20)
- » "He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has *avenged on her the blood of His servants* shed by her." (Revelation 19:2)

Within Revelation, a more common term for God's vengeance is His "wrath":

- » During the opening of the Sixth Seal, men will cry out, "[H]ide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from *the wrath of the Lamb!* For the great day of *His wrath* has come, and who is able to stand?" (Revelation 6:16-17)
- » When the seventh angel sounds, and "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" (Revelation 11:15), the twenty-four elders will say, "The nations raged, but *your wrath came*, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." (Revelation 11:18, *English Standard Version*)

» Those who worship the end-time beast, receiving his mark, “shall also drink of the wine of *the wrath of God*, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation.” (Revelation 14:10)

» “So the angel thrust his sickle into the earth and gathered the vine of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of *the wrath of God*. And the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horses’ bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs.” (Revelation 14:19-20)

» “Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them *the wrath of God* is complete.” (Revelation 15:1)

» “Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of *the wrath of God* who lives forever and ever.” (Revelation 15:7)

» “Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, ‘Go and pour out the bowls of *the wrath of God* on the earth.’” (Revelation 16:1)

» “Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of *His wrath*.” (Revelation 16:19)

» “Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike *the nations*. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of *the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God*.” (Revelation 19:15)

Along these lines, Isaiah prophesies of God:

“I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will halt the arrogance of the proud, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a mortal more rare than fine

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gold, a man more [scarce] than the golden wedge of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts and in the day of His fierce anger.” (Isaiah 13:11-13)

Judgment in Love

The various prophecies answer conclusively why no flesh would be saved if end-time events were left to run their course. While mankind’s inventions often end up being a mixed bag of good and evil, technological advancement is not the great danger that lies ahead. Rather, the danger at the end is the same one that has existed since the beginning: That the creation will refuse to hear and obey its Creator and Life-giver (Genesis 2:16-17), earning vengeance, wrath, and death as its wages (Romans 6:23).

While the prophecies of God’s vengeance and wrath may seem to be at odds with God’s fundamentally loving nature (I John 4:8), consider that it is *because* the Creator wants what is best for His creation that He will decisively intervene after mercifully giving every opportunity to repent. It would not be loving to allow mankind to continue its destructive trajectory of rejecting the Source of truth in how to live. It likewise would not be loving to allow unrepented sins to go unpunished, allowing injustices to mount.

Wise Solomon notes in Ecclesiastes 8:11-13:

Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

A day is coming when the accounts will be settled. Because of the hardness of the human heart, that day will manifest primarily in wrath, though there will be mercy for the elect’s sake. It boggles the mind to consider that even as the last plagues are unfolding, men will *still* refuse to repent and will

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instead blaspheme God's name (Revelation 9:20-21; 16:8-11). After such long forbearance, are not the Creator's vengeance and wrath justified against such a rebellious creation?