

Joel 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 August 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Joel chapter 3. For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and I will enter into judgment with them there, on behalf of my people and my heritage Israel, because they have scattered them among the nations, and have divided up my land, and have cast lots for my people, and have traded a boy for a prostitute, and have sold a girl for wine, and have drunk it. What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will return your payment on your own head, swiftly and speedily, for you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, in order to remove them far from their own border. Behold, I will stir them up from the place to which you have sold them, and I will return your payment on your own head.

I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabaeans, to a nation far away, for the Lord has spoken. Proclaim this among the nations, consecrate for war, stir up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near, let them come up, beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weak say, I am a warrior. Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there.

Bring down your warriors, O Lord. Let the nations stir themselves up, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full, the vats overflow, for their evil is great.

Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision, for the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake. But the Lord is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel. So you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it. And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water, and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord, and water the valley of Shittim. Egypt shall become a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the Lord dwells in Zion. The conclusion of the prophecy of Joel in chapter 3 continues the hopeful themes of the reversal of Judah's fortune, and its restoration, first introduced in chapter 2 verse 18. It follows from the events foretold in chapter 2 verse 28, where the Spirit would be poured out upon the people. While the first two chapters focused upon the locust invasion, and the surrounding nations were not directly mentioned, they become central to the picture in this final chapter, and are directly addressed. As Judah is set right with the Lord once more, the Lord enters into judgment with their enemies. The coming of the day of the Lord was powerfully presented in the preceding two chapters, and once again the day of the Lord is an important element of this chapter. However, now the day of the Lord has a far more positive aspect, and is something eagerly to be awaited. It will be a day of judgment and vindication, by which Judah will be established. The other nations will face the sort of devastation that Judah itself had earlier suffered in its rebellion. The Lord's judgment of his people's oppressors on his great day is also mentioned as a feature of that day in places like Zephaniah chapter 3 verse 8.

Therefore wait for me, declares the Lord, for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger, for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed. As the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, he will assemble the nations together in the valley of Jehoshaphat, bringing them together for a greater size, judging them for the wrongs that they had committed against his people Israel, while Col Keller is an example of someone who claims that Israel here refers to the northern kingdom.

[4 : 36] Like most commentators, I believe that this is better understood as a reference to the people more generally, as the northern kingdom had long since fallen, and many of the wrongs that were being judged here were directed more against the southern kingdom of Judah. At the time that the prophecy is written, or perhaps the time to which it refers, the people had been scattered among the nations, and the land had come under the power of its neighbours, and the larger power of what was most likely Babylon, although commentators who placed the prophecy later in time might relate it to one of the other powers that followed Babylon. The gathering place would be the valley of Jehoshaphat. The name Jehoshaphat clearly recalls the name of the Davidic king of Judah. In King Jehoshaphat's day, in an event recorded in 2nd Chronicles chapter 20, the Lord had accomplished a remarkable deliverance from a coalition of nations in the valley of Barakah, as the Lord had set an ambush against them and turned them against each other, so that the enemies of Judah ended up killing each other. The valley of Jehoshaphat might be designed to recall this deliverance, as the Lord would once again miraculously save his people. That said, the valley in question was some distance from

Jerusalem, so it's not the valley that is literally in question here. In verse 14, the valley is called the valley of decision, and it is likely that we are supposed to understand the valley of Jehoshaphat figuratively, recalling both the deliverance in Jehoshaphat's day, and also recognizing the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat, Yahweh judges. Verse 12 seems to support the idea that the valley is called the valley of Jehoshaphat, chiefly on account of the meaning of the name Jehoshaphat. Let the nations stir themselves up, and come to the valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. The valley of Jehoshaphat would later come to be associated with the Kidron Wadi, or valley near Jerusalem, perhaps on the basis of other passages such as Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 40, the whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or overthrown any more forever. Of course, in scripture, valleys like the Kidron Valley, or valleys like the valley of the son of Hinnom, could take on a deeper symbolic significance, representing things far beyond a mere geographical location. Elsewhere, a symbolic valley is represented as a site of great judgment. For instance, in Isaiah chapter 22, with the valley of vision,

Zechariah chapter 14, a text that is most likely later than Joel, develops the imagery of the valley of the Lord's judgment, describing the creation of a valley near Jerusalem, and the Lord entering into judgment against his people's enemies there. In verses 1 to 4 of that chapter, Behold, the day is coming for the Lord, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst.

For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken, and the houses plundered, and the women raped. Half of the city shall go out into exile, but the rest of the people shall not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as when he fights on the day of battle. On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward, and the other half southward. Leslie Allen observes the resemblance between the gathering of the nations in this chapter in Joel, and Jesus' teaching of the nations being gathered before him, and separated like sheep from goats, in Matthew chapter 25. The nations had cast lots for the people, while they were not like the apex predator of Babylon that had brought Jerusalem down.

Tyre, Sidon, and the Philistines all played their part in picking clean the bones of the defeated city and its people. Like scavengers, they had stripped the Lord's riches and brought them into their own temples. The Lord proclaimed similar judgments against these nations elsewhere in scripture, in places like the book of Ezekiel. They had taken his people and sold them overseas to the Greeks, far from their own land. However, the Lord would bring their sin back upon their own heads.

[8 : 47] The very nation that they had sold would sell them. While they had sold the Judeans to the Greeks in the west, they would be sold to the Sabaeans in the east, far away in the other direction.

As Allen notes, these nations were reduced to slavery and servitude in the mid-4th century BC. The summons to the valley of Jehoshaphat is first of all a summons to battle. The nations, unwitting that they are the intended victims, are called out to war, coming up against the city of Jerusalem, where the Lord himself would deal with them. This great battle is one for which as many weapons as possible must be forged. Famously, Isaiah chapter 2 verse 4 prophesied a coming time of peace. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Here that statement is reversed. Farmers must become warriors, and agricultural tools must be repurposed as weapons. Everyone, small and great, weak and strong, must be assembled for this great climactic battle against the Lord and his people.

They do not, of course, realize that they are hastening towards the site of their own judgment and destruction, where the Lord will enact his sentence against them. The image of the nations gathered against Jerusalem, presumably about to overwhelm it, when they are decisively judged by the Lord, is an image that occurs on a number of occasions in scripture. We might think, for instance, of the conclusion of the thousand years in Revelation chapter 20 verses 7 to 10. And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison, will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle. Their number is like the sand of the sea.

And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth, and surrounded the camp of the saints, and the beloved city. But fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. And they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever. The day of the Lord has various different expressions in history and prophecy, but they do tend to rhyme. The outcome of this great judgment and deliverance is described in the verses that conclude the chapter.

The nations will experience the full force of the day of the Lord. The book of Joel began with devastated fields and empty wine presses due to the locust plague. Now, however, a great harvest is ripe, the wine press is full, and the vats are overflowing. The valley, where all will be decided, and the sentence passed, is full, teeming with an innumerable horde, ready to be harvested and trodden underfoot, like grain to be cut or grapes to be trodden. Imagery of judgment as a harvest is found elsewhere in scripture, in both positive and negative forms. For instance, Revelation chapter 14 draws upon the imagery of Joel chapter 3, as angels are instructed to put in their sickles to harvest the grain and the grapes of the earth. The imagery of the day of the Lord of chapter 2 verses 10 to 11, with the sun and the moon being darkened, and the stars withdrawing their shining, reappears in verses 15 to 16. Once again, the heavens and the earth shake as the Lord utters his voice from Zion.

[12:05] There is a replay of the day of the Lord, but now Israel is being delivered. The Lord will be his people's refuge and defender, no longer the unstoppable adversary against them. It is worth observing at this point that the description of the Lord roaring from Zion in verse 16 is also found at the very beginning of the book of Amos, the prophet that follows in the ordering of the book of the twelve, in chapter 1 verse 2 of that prophecy. This is one of the thematic and literary connections between books to which many commentators draw attention. Through his judgment upon the nations, the Lord would prove his great name, showing that he had set apart Jerusalem as the place of his special dwelling, and that he would not permit it to be defiled.

The book of Joel began with a threat to the fertility and produce of the land. In verse 18, the fruitfulness of the land is bountifully restored. While the fruitfulness and fertility of the land could include the natural blessings of rain and plentiful crops, the image here, as in the opening chapters, is likely symbolic of the blessings of the land in fellowship with the Lord in a broader sense.

The description here is hyperbolic, with wine flowing down the mountainsides, milk down the hills, and none of the stream beds being dry. This restoration of the life and joy-giving fluids of the land ultimately comes from the renewed presence of the Lord in the midst of his people to bless them, particularly seen in the fountain that comes out from the sanctuary.

The locusts in the first two chapters had taken places like Eden and reduced them to desolate wilderness, but now a new Eden is being formed. The sanctuary of the temple is like a new Eden, and just as in the case of the original Eden, a river is going to flow out of it to water the lands.

Of course, much as the Valley of Jehoshaphat, this is not a literal river from the house of the Lord, but it is still a real, albeit symbolic one, anticipating the river of the water of life that flows from the new Jerusalem, giving healing to the nations. In Ezekiel chapter 47, Ezekiel describes the river that will flow out of his visionary temple, bringing fruitfulness to the land, watering the dry places, and turning the salt waters sweet.

[14:12] Here we find a similar image. The Lord would avenge his people and their enemies. Egypt and Edom, which had both preyed upon them, would be judged, while Judah and Jerusalem would be established forever.

A question to consider. In verse 19, the prophet refers to Edom being made a desolate wilderness for the violence done to the people of Judah, shedding innocent blood in their land.

Considering other statements in scripture, particularly in the prophets, to what historical events do you think that this sin might refer?