

I Will Restore

Joel 3:1-21

Series: Joel and Malachi (Fall 2020)

Preaching Date: October 4, 2020

Topic: Amid the trials of life we turn to a compassionate and just God.

Worship: Great and Mighty God

Key Sentence:

That day shall be judgment for the evildoers and restoration for his people.

Outline:

I. I will judge what has been done to you (Joel 3:1-8)

II. I will judge the gathered nations (Joel 3:9-16)

III. I will restore my gathered people (Joel 3:17-21)

Joel 3:1-21 “For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, ²I 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, ³and 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.

⁴“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. ⁵For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. ⁶You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their own border. ⁷Behold, I will stir them up from the place to which you have sold them, and I will return your payment on your own head. ⁸I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, to a nation far away, for the LORD has spoken.”

⁹Proclaim this among the nations: Consecrate for war; stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near; let them come up. ¹⁰Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, “I am a warrior.”

¹¹Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD. ¹²Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.

¹³Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.

¹⁴Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars

withdraw their shining. ¹⁶The 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.

¹⁷“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. ¹⁸“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.

¹⁹“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. ²⁰But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations.

²¹I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the LORD dwells in Zion.”

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Joel 3:1-21

People are endlessly fascinated by the end of the world. I offer as evidence a chart I saw on Wikipedia, a partial listing of “end of the world” movies. The earliest entry is from 1933, a movie called *Deluge* about surviving a worldwide series of natural disasters. The cold war of the 1960’s was a fertile time for nuclear holocaust movies, notably Stanley Kubrick’s blackly satirical *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. It was about the madness of “mutually assured destruction.” Spoiler alert: it ends with the nuclear holocaust almost but not quite avoided. Novels also addressed this issue, notably Walter Miller’s 1959 classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Still one of the finest science fiction stories ever written, it chills the reader with its inevitable march to a yet greater nuclear self-destruction.

In the eighties and nineties the focus shifted to how the world could avoid or recover from natural disaster. The movie *Armageddon* was the first to postulate the arrival of a civilization-destroying asteroid. It was the one where they sent a group of oil field drillers on space shuttles to split the asteroid with a nuclear bomb. In that same decade I read *Lucifer’s Hammer* by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, a gripping account of what holding on to civilization might look like in a post-asteroid world. Films also focused on what happens after the apocalypse. The includes *The Hunger Games*, a dystopian vision of post-war civilization, and *A Quiet Place* with the desperation of life among non-seeing-all-hearing aliens. But even the animated *WALL-E* is a dystopia, a ravaged planet that takes centuries to return to livability.

Why do people have this fascination with the end of the world? I think part of it is a God-given sense that this can’t go on. Whether we’re looking at the beauty of the world as created or the horror of the world after the fall, we have an inward sense that neither the fragile beauty nor the self-destructive horror is ultimately sustainable. Something has to give. God’s revelation in Scripture perfectly reflects this inward sense. The world, God says, is going someplace. Through cataclysm and horror it is going toward judgment of all that is evil and restoration and renewal of all that is good. That’s what we see in the last chapter of Joel. These 21 verses are an end-of-the-world dystopia that reveals the utopian truth of God’s rescue and restoration. The chapter begins and ends with the promise of restoration, and the first eight verses set that restoration over against the judgment of those who have brought harm to God’s people.

Joel 3:1-8 *“For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, ²I 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, ³and 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. ⁴“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. ⁵For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. ⁶You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their own border. ⁷Behold, I will stir them up from the place to which you have sold them, and I will return your payment on your own head. ⁸I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, to a nation far away, for the LORD has spoken.”*

Verses 1 and 2 establish the main points. “For behold, in those days and at that time I will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem.” This chapter looks forward to the Day of the Lord, but in the context of ‘this day’ for Joel’s readers. That generation of God’s people and our generation of God’s people and all the generations in between have the promise of God’s good justice on our behalf. We may be facing true persecution, as many are in the world or we may just be facing the cruel realities of a world without God, yet we have hope that in that day the fortunes of God’s people will be restored. The Hebrew phrase is fascinating. It looks like the second word should be captivity, so the phrase would literally be “return” or “restore” the captivity of God’s people, as in the King James Version. But scholars have noticed that the second word, read differently, is a repetition of the verb “return” turning the phrase into “return the returning” of God’s people or “restore the restoration.” It’s in this sense, since English doesn’t do doubled verbs, that most translations say “restoring the fortunes.” God promises to turn the misfortune of his people back on itself.

Joel pairs this restoration with the judgment of the nations in that Day, verse 2. “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.” The first chapter of Joel was the locust chapter. This chapter is the valley chapter. We’ll see this valley two more times in later verses and I’ll defer most of the discussion of it until then. All I’ll say at this point is that Jehoshaphat is the name of a Hebrew King and we’ll talk about his valley later, but it is also a compound word that means “Jehovah judges” or “God judges.” The valley of Jehoshaphat is the place where God gathers the nations for judgment.

What are they judged for? It would be just for them to be judged for their personal and national sins quite apart from the relationship they had to God's people. Indeed, when we studied the Day of the Lord, God said "I will bring distress on mankind, so that they shall walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD." But here and in no few other places, nations are judged for the harm they do to God's people. From the time of the fall on, as God began to display his steadfast love by calling out a people for himself, Satan has aroused the world against them. Judah was never just one little nation caught in the vicissitudes of violent world history. Judah was targeted, God's people have always been targeted by evil and vile enemies and an enemy.

So beginning in verse 2 God says "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." Notice how possessive God is. "My people, my heritage, my land. These things are precious to me. You have scattered my people and divided my land like it was your own." This was true not only in Judah's past and the exile, but as Joel wrote large parts of historic Israel were still occupied by foreigners from surrounding nations.

In verse 3 God charges these nations with human trafficking. You 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." David Allan Hubbard says "Scarcely anything rankles God more than inhumanity. People are treated like property to be had by the casting of lots. At prices ridiculously low, persons are bartered like goods for a moment of pleasure, an evening with a harlot or a skin of wine. Though the victims in this passage are Judah's children, the same principle of inhumanity, of depersonalization, is scathingly denounced in Amos 1 and 2 where foreign nations are the ones humiliated and in Deuteronomy 21:14 which bans the sale of captured troops." I've often said that Satan's great tool for oppression and genocide is the dehumanization of God's image bearers. It's happened to the Jews all through history, most horrifically in the holocaust, but it has happened to many nations and races. American slavery depended on the dehumanization of the black slave. Modern sex trafficking and pornography both depend on the depersonalization of women. "This is not a person, this is an object." And it rankles God. It infuriates God when people made in his image are treated as objects or condemned by group rather than known as individuals.

This judgment, while specific to circumstances and injustice against God's people, is also against all sin and oppression. God mentions more nations in verse 4: "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."

The phrase “are you paying me back?” implies these nations felt a grudge against God, maybe for choosing and blessing the nation of Israel or for condemning their false gods and their ways and practices. Tyre, in particular, is chastised for pride and its self-serving kings. These nations are trying to get even by taking all the silver and gold from the temple, verse 5 and selling the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks as slaves, verse 6. The Greeks, by the way, were a known but relatively insignificant power in Joel’s day.

These behaviors, God says, require him to come in judgment and justice. Verse 7 “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. ⁸I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, to a nation far away, for the LORD has spoken.” We have a saying, “what goes around comes around,” Hubbard points out that the Greeks, to whom the Jews were trafficked, later became a world dominating empire and each of these nations was conquered by them and used as slaves. And Elizabeth Actemeier says “throughout the Scriptures God’s punishment of evil often consists in letting the evil return on the sinners’ own heads.”

This, however, falls short of the full punishment of the sin of these nations. If the first point of this text is that God will judge what has been done to his people, the second is that he will punish all the sin of the gathered nations on that Day. Verses 9-16 *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. ¹⁰Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, “I am a warrior.” ¹¹Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD. ¹²Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. ¹³Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. ¹⁴Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. ¹⁶The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth quake.*

Verses 9-11 depict the assembly of a massive army to fight on behalf of the nations. This imagery emerges repeatedly in the prophets. Jeremiah 46, for example, says “Prepare buckler and shield, and advance for battle! ⁴Harness the horses; mount, O horsemen! Take your stations with your helmets, polish your spears, put on your armor! . . . Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots! Let the warriors go out: men of Cush and Put who handle the shield, men of Lud, skilled in handling the bow. ¹⁰That day is the day of the Lord GOD of hosts.”

Verse 10 deliberately reverses the wording of the familiar end-times passages where weapons of war are forged into tools of productivity. Isaiah 2:4 “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; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” That’s certainly the outcome of the last days, but these verses look at the fully armed battle that culminates that Day. God wants the nations to finally learn the futility of warring against him. The last phrase of verse 11 implies that once these nations are gathered, God shows up with his army, his warriors. To what can we compare this? It’s the reverse of that moment in the Lord of the Rings where the black gate opens and the armies of Mordor take the field against the remnant army of Gondor and Rohan. Instead of the good guys being outnumbered and overwhelmed, the heavenly host of God probably overmatches the armies of all the nations.

Verse 12 tells us again that the place these hosts gather is the valley of Jehoshaphat. What is this valley? It is, first of all, the place where God “will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.” The armies of the nations gather in all their numbers, the host of heaven uncountable, but God sits to judge. This will not be a battle in the traditional sense. It will simply be God’s judgment. What image can we use? It’s like an army of ants going out to fight a dam. The ants may come up in force, but if the dam breaks they are wiped out in an instant. Such is the justice of God. When the final judgment of God on sin takes place, it will not be a contest, for no combination of nations can stand against the Lord. This is why our worship theme has focused on the great and mighty God. He is.

In verse 14 the valley of Jehoshaphat is called the valley of decision. Jehoshaphat is “God Judges”, and decision is “God renders a verdict.” They are two views of the same epic moment. That doesn’t mean King Jehoshaphat is completely out of the picture here. You’ve heard his story before. While Jehoshaphat was King of Judah, Jerusalem was besieged by a multitude of enemies from Moab, Ammon and Mount Seir. In 2nd Chronicles 20 Jehoshaphat prays a great prayer of faith which ends with the classic line “we don’t know what to do but our eyes are on you.” Then a prophet of God stands up and says “Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s. . . . You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD.” Jehoshaphat went out, but only to see God’s effortless victory in a valley he named “Berecah” or blessing.

In the same way in the greater battle, the Lord will effortlessly judge the combined armies of the world. Verse 13 “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.”

Like a rich harvest ready to be reaped, like the grapes of a fertile vineyard ready to be gathered, so is the abundant and full-grown sin of the nations. The Lord himself will harvest it. Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.” This is the great battle.

So you’ll ask me two questions. One, do I think this is a literal battle; and two, what about Armageddon? I thought the battle was called Armageddon? That’s the pop-cultural word for a climactic battle. The answers are related. Yes, I do believe this is an actual gathering of armies and nations against the land of Israel. This isn’t the only prophecy of the climactic battle. Consider Zechariah 14:1–9. Listen for the battle and it’s outcome. “Behold, a day is coming for the LORD, when the spoil taken from you will be divided in your midst. ²For 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. ³Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle. ⁴On 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. ⁵And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Azal. You shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him. ⁶On that day there shall be no light, cold, or frost. ⁷And there shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light. ⁸On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. ⁹And the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one.” We don’t have time to unpack that, but clearly it’s the same day of the Lord, day of victory, day Jesus lands on the Mount of Olives. It’s a future victory against real armies threatening God’s people, and with real consequences of judgment and blessing.

And what about Armageddon? I think it’s the same battle. In Revelation 16 the sixth bowl of God’s judgment is poured out “on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.” ¹³And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. . . .¹⁶And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”

Armageddon is a place: the valley of Megiddo, also known as the valley of Jezreel, where many pivotal battles of ancient history were fought. I suspect the three valleys are the same: the valley of Jehoshaphat is the valley of decision is the valley of Megiddo. In Revelation when the last bowl is poured out, just as in Joel, we see not a battle but an effortless victory. Revelation 16:17 “The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!”¹⁸ And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.” The rest of Revelation celebrates that victory and tells of the reign of Christ on earth until an even greater battle and more effortless victory ushers in the New Heavens and New Earth, our eternal home.

This is what Joel was seeing in chapter 3. In that day God will execute justice for what has been done to his people. He will judge the gathered nations that seek to destroy his people. Finally, God will restore his gathered people. Verses 17-21, but actually the end of verse 16 *But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.*¹⁷ *“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.”*¹⁸ *“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.”*¹⁹ *“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.”*²⁰ *“But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations.”*²¹ *“I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the LORD dwells in Zion.”*

“The LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.” This is another “But God,” as we saw in chapter 2. The Lord comes to judge, but out of his grace and steadfast love, he comes as a refuge to his people, a stronghold to which they can run. The result is a sure knowledge of God “You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain.” You will be my people and I will be your God and I will dwell with you. This is the outcome of that Day. The blessings of abundance and provision given in chapter 2 will be realized “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.” That’s another valley, on the other side of the Jordan river, far from Jerusalem, now watered by the Lord’s presence.

Israel's traditional enemies, Egypt and Edom will become desolate. And again, this is a proportional justice. Both these nations did violence to the people of Israel and shed innocent blood, and the Lord had never executed judgment on them. But now he avenges their blood. He comes to dwell in Zion and to restore his people to Judah and Jerusalem. Again, I believe the primary fulfillment of this will be in the millennial reign of Christ on earth, when all the promises to Israel, made in faith by a faithful God will be fulfilled. But I believe the millennium itself will be only a foreshadowing of the eternal goodness that we will experience in the New Heavens and the New Earth of Revelation 21.

What have we said? There is a day coming when God will judge sin. All the injustice, oppression and hurt that are the tragic result of humankind's fallen condition will finally reap what it has sown, and justice will be done to the oppressors. This is not only true in the case of slavery and human trafficking which Joel uses as his example, but all the injustice, misery, wrong and hurt that has been done since the fall, with a special emphasis on wrongs done to God's people.

In that Day, after judgment will come restoration. The God of mercy, grace and steadfast love will relent of judgment against any judgment deserving sinner who has turned to him from sin and cried out to Him. As we saw last week, all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. We'll talk about that more as we prepare for communion in a few minutes.

Right now, I want to close as I don't often do by drawing your attention to three simple applications of this truth. First, rejoice to know that God cares about you as much as he did about the people of Judah in Joel's day. He loves you with steadfast love, mercy and grace, and just as he was infuriated with the wrongs done to his people, so he is infuriated with the wrongs and injustices done to you and done in this fallen world, and they move his love to action. Rejoice that you are the object of his love. Second, turn today from the unjust and dehumanizing practices of those who are incurring God's judgements. Reject anything that calls people made God's image enemies or inferiors. Reject the temptation to treat people as objects or groups. And third, cling to hope, for though the end is coming and the judgment of that Day is near, it is also the Day of rescue and all that is broken will be restored.