

## **Joel 3: 1-21**

### **The day of the LORD: A day of decision**

**28-7-02**

#### **Introduction**

One of the news items during this last week was that the members of the community in Omagh in Northern Ireland who lost relatives in the bomb four of five years ago are pursuing a civil action against the people they presume were the perpetrators of that act. Although the bombing was a number of years ago, there is that unquenchable desire for justice to be done and for it to be seen to be done. That is perhaps something that all of us to a greater or lesser extent can identify with. We saw it with the Lockerbie bombing back in 1989 and the way in which there was that great desire for justice to be done then bringing the Libyan suspects to a trial in the Hague. That is clearly something that God has put within us, as he also has this unquenchable desire for justice to be done and to be seen to be done. As we come to this final chapter of Joel we see that this is a chapter about judgement, but it is a chapter about judgement which is very important for us as the church to understand and to recognise that this is actually not so much bad news (well clearly it is bad news) as good news - good news for an oppressed people. If we were to go abroad, for example to the Sudan, and, as we were shown earlier this year in a presentation to the diocesan evangelical fellowship by Baroness Cox, if we were to look at the slides there or even to meet those people, Christians who have been persecuted and who have no redress in the courts, we would realise that there is that desire for justice. But it is not a justice that they can achieve in their own strength. If an injustice is done to us as a church family, if we were minded to, we could no doubt appeal to justice from our own courts and perhaps there would be a fair chance that we would receive justice. But in a situation like Sudan and many other places within the world, in human terms, there is no prospect of getting justice for the church in situations where she is persecuted. So the fact that one day all those wrongs will be righted, that one day there will be a day of justice, when those who have been persecuted and oppressed will be vindicated, is actually a wonderful day of good news for the church, though it is bad news for those who have turned against the LORD. And therefore as we look at this final chapter of Joel let us keep that in mind that this is a message of great news to a people who have gone through a time of great devastation and persecution. And as we think of our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world going through such difficult times, let us pray that they also would be able to have the confidence of this hope that we see in Joel chapter three.

Now let's just briefly look at the context of this chapter, and look at what we have been looking at in chapter one and chapter two. Now chapter three starts off by saying, *'In those days and at that time when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem'*. And what has happened in the prophesy of Joel is that Israel, God's people, have faced this time of judgement when God had sent these various plagues of locusts that had devastated the land. We read about that in chapter one from verse one all the way through to chapter two and verse eleven. But nevertheless by God's grace, and by God's grace alone, the fortunes of God's people had indeed been restored. We can read about that in chapter 2 v19-27. There might be many even here today who look at the stock market, recognising the falls there have been in the London stock market and on the Dow Jones index over the last few weeks, longing, perhaps, for fortunes to be restored. And that is the longing that Israel had and the prophesy of chapter two is that, there will be this day when God will restore their fortunes and pour out his grace and goodness upon God's people. We saw how that was fulfilled in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. But what about the nations? It's okay to think about God's people, but what about the surrounding nations? Well, we read in chapter two that they have laughed at God's people, 2 v17, *'Why should they say among the peoples "Where is their God?"'* They have laughed at God's people as God's people have gone through this time of difficulty and it says in 2 v26 and v27 that *'never again will my people be shamed'*. It is as if the nations have been laughing at God's people. What sort of God is it you worship who has let you be devastated by all these plagues of locust? And so they have laughed. What will now happen is that they face their appointment with God on this final day of judgement. And so in 3 v1, *'In those days and at that time when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehosaphat and there I will enter into judgement against them.'* And so the nations, are to face God's judgement, and it is already foretold and we have already seen the role that God's people will have in this. Just a brief look back to 2 v28-32 will set this in context for us. In 2 v28, God says, *'I will pour out my spirit on all people'*. Of course that is a prophesy that was quoted by the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. And what Peter is saying there, as Joel is saying here, is that a day will come when God will pour out his spirit so that all of God's people will be prophets, that all of us as God's people will be able to declare the future with great certainty. What is the future? Well it is spelled out for us in 2 v30 and v31 that there will be a day of judgement coming upon all peoples. It is a definite day and it is a day that will certainly come. And it is indeed a dreadful day of the LORD, as v31

says, on those who are unprepared. Therefore our message is to warn folk that that day is coming, but positively, in v32, to encourage people to call on the name of the Lord while there is still time. But what happens to those who do not turn to God? That is now the subject of chapter three and we come to our first point.

## **1. A Surprising Judgement (3:1-16a)**

Here I have four questions:

### **i) Why are the people to be judged?**

Is it for general immorality, for the way they have turned against God's laws? Is it for idolatry, for worshipping gods like the Baals or Asherah poles? Well certainly the other prophets will highlight that those are indeed things that God will judge the nations for, but notice that the particular focus here in chapter three is slightly different. As we look through v2-6 the reason why the nations are to be judged is for their behaviour towards God's own people. Let's look at that at the end of verse two; *'I will gather all nations, I will enter into judgement against them'*, why?, *'concerning my inheritance, my people Israel. For they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land'*, (note *'my land'*), *'they cast lots for my people'*. You see the focus here is not so much on what the nations have done in general, but the way in which they have persecuted God's own people, God's own possession. You see, think how you feel when you see a car that has been vandalised. Perhaps you are just driving through a city you have not been in before, and so perhaps it does not mean very much to you. You might say "That's a shame" and just drive on. But if it were your car that had been vandalised your thoughts would be very different. Here we see the way in which God is aroused out of a sense of loyalty for his own covenant people. If we would care for our possessions that have been spoilt and scattered, how much more does God feel when his people, whether in Sudan, whether in an office in the City in London, or wherever we are - how much more will God feel when his people are ill treated and neglected. And that surely highlights how much God values and cares for his own people because we are his own possession and therefore final judgement is indeed fuelled by God's burning love for his ill treated people. So it's not that God's judgement is driven by this burning anger against everything in particular, but it is clearly focussed. It is driven by his love and compassion for his ill treated people scattered around the world. And indeed that is a theme that is brought out in the

New Testament. Do you remember when Jesus in one of his final parables, the parable of the sheep and the goats, said this, *'He will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels."*, and notice that the words of judgement that the Lord Jesus uses are even more severe and extreme than the ones Joel used in the Old Testament, but Jesus says, *'I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'* And they will all answer, *'LORD, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or sick or in prison'* and so on, and then he will reply, *'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these my brethren you did not do for me, and then they will go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life.'*

So let's make sure we have got that correct in our thinking; it is a surprising judgement because it is fuelled by God's burning love for his ill treated people.

## **ii) What is their judgement?**

Again we might be tempted to think from, perhaps, a cursory knowledge of the Old Testament, that God's judgement is pretty indiscriminate. Perhaps like the bombing of Dresden in 1945 where much of the city centre and housing of Dresden was carpet-bombed, or perhaps rather like the 1987 storm around Sevenoaks where more-or-less everything was flattened. Is God's judgement going to be like that? Well again we find a slight surprise, because we see as we look at the text in v4-8 something slightly different, *'What have you against me, O Tyre and Sidon and all you regions of Philistia? Are you paying me back for something I have done? If you are paying me back, I will swiftly and speedily return on your own heads what you have done.'* And then in v7, *'See, I am going to rouse them out of the places to which you have sold them, and I will return on your own heads what you have done.'* And the note that we see there is that judgement is totally fair. It is merely a paying back of what the nations had done to God's people. Again that is something we need to remind ourselves of, especially if we are in conversation with our non-Christian friends. They might say that hell is totally unfair, whereas from a passage like this we would want to say that God's judgement is in fact the reverse, it is totally fair and that only what is deserved will be meted out. Indeed that idea of fairness is something built into the whole way that we live. Even in our earliest days in the school

playground that cry, "It's not fair" comes out of our lips. It is the same whether it is in life or in school or wherever we are, and that is the way in which God will judge. So for example in another New Testament text, Paul is teaching in 2 Thessalonians and this is how he explains judgement, *'The Lord Jesus will punish those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.'* Those who have shut out God and do not obey him will themselves be shut out from the glories of heaven. There is a fairness about the sentence. It is a terrible sentence, but there is a fairness about the way God metes out his judgement. If we shut him out, he will shut us out.

And so that is our second surprise here; that the judgement of the nations is fuelled by God's desire for fairness.

### **iii) How will judgement happen?**

Is it, as it were, that God picks a fight against folk who will turn round on the last day and be totally surprised at the sense of meeting God face to face at the end? Again that is not the case at all, and as we move through our chapter, v9-11, we see that it is the nations who prepare for war against God, *'Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack.'* And it is the nations who beat their ploughshares into swords, and their pruning hooks and farming implements into spears. And even the weakest of them says *'I am strong'*. They will be saying to each other, *'Come quickly, all you nations from every side, and assemble there.'* What we see is actually mankind fighting against God, arming themselves for war. Little over a month ago we were slightly apprehensive about the prospect of Pakistan and India arming themselves for a possible war. But that is what is happening here, in v9-11. Joel looks forward to a time when the nations will be gathering together to fight against God. Indeed it is a reversal of God's great plan for peace when he says that at the very end those that are his people will beat their swords into ploughshares and their pruning hooks into spears. That is what God's people will do on the last day because it will be a day of peace, but before then the nations are doing exactly the opposite and are arming themselves for war. Again that is a New Testament theme, and picking one verse at random, Colossians 1 v21, *'Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.'* And all the way through the New Testament we are reminded that actually nobody is neutral, and mankind is actually fighting

against God, and on the last day it won't be a sense of surprise that God wanted people to do things, because in fact the reality that we are told within the Scriptures is that all through people's lives they are fighting against God, resisting God's ways and declaring themselves in so many ways to be enemies of God. So the judgement of the nations here is generated and fuelled by mankind's anger against God, not so much, indeed, God's anger against them, although that is clearly very true.

#### **iv) When will it happen?**

Well often in terms of final judgement, even we as Christians are often wondering whether it is all just words or whether something is actually going to happen at the end. But in v12-16 we are told that the Day of the LORD, the Day of Yahweh is indeed a certain date in the future, *'Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side.'* And v16, *'The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble.'* This Day of the LORD will certainly happen. And there are two images that are used in this passage; verse thirteen is of the harvest. The season starts with the trimming of the vines and then there is the growth of the fruit and the crops and then at an uncertain but definite date in the future the harvest will be ripe. Then at the end of the season the grapes will be removed and then they will be crushed leaving the grape vines bare, and the harvest will be brought in leaving the field bare. There will be that day of harvest, that day of judgement. Similarly the other image used in verse fourteen is of the judge's verdict at the end of a legal case. Many people in the media may have had their say and pronounced their verdict on the defendant. The defendant may have had their say and decided what their decision it. But at the end of the case, whether it is long or short, it will be the judge's day of decision. We often think, and ask people in our evangelistic talks, to make a decision for Christ and put a lot of stress on their decision and what they will make of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. But in verse fourteen we see that the important thing is not so much their decision as the LORD's decision, *'Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.'* The day of His decision. And yes, clearly it is right to encourage people to make their decision to follow the Lord, but it must always be done in the context that ultimately it is the LORD's decision that is the most important. And so the judgement of the nations is driven by the certainty of a date in the future when God will make this decision and cast His verdict.

And therefore as we have seen in the first half of this chapter we must let our thoughts of judgement be fully biblical. We must not think of judgement in terms of some irrational God wreaking havoc where he desires and wished. But in fact it is much more controlled and thought through in the way that Joel explains it. It is something driven by God's desire to protect His people. It is done with absolute fairness. It is something that is fuelled as much by man's anger against God as God's against man, and it is a certain date when this decision will be made, a decision of absolute fairness, and therefore all the more reason for us to warn and encourage, and to remind people that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

## **2. A Revealing Judgement**

All our actions reveal something about ourselves, for instance you might have a boss at work, and you rarely see that person outside their working environment. Perhaps you spend a Sunday afternoon with them and you see them playing with a small child and that reveals aspects of their character previously hidden from you. And what we are told here is that the day of the LORD will reveal to us things we know now by faith but which we will then see very clearly about the LORD. So what are these things we are going to see about the LORD on this great day in the future, which the persecuted church throughout the world is looking forward to, this great day that we should be looking forward to, this great day of justice?

### **i) We will see that the LORD is alive and active**

You see, many say to us, "Is God really there? You pray for peace but the wars don't seem to stop." All these things happen in the world that seem to say the world is out of control. It seems like a house where all the lights are off day after day and you conclude in the end that there is nobody at home". And so the world taunts us with these kinds of thoughts. And perhaps sometimes in our days of doubt we wonder if God is really there. And the day of judgement will be the day when beyond all shadow of doubt we will know the reality of the LORD, *'Then you will know'*, v17, *'that I the LORD your God dwell in Zion, my holy hill.'* Then you will know that I haven't wandered away, that I am your God, that I am real, alive and powerful. Or, v21, at the end, *'The LORD dwells in Zion'*, this great conclusion that Joel comes to, when everybody will know that God is indeed at home in Zion, that he is alive. Everybody will know that he is active and powerful

## **ii) We will see that the LORD keeps all his promises**

You see, again, we might be tempted to say, "God has forgotten us, he has forgotten his promises." Those Christians facing persecution, those in Sudan or Vietnam or other places around the world, may be tempted to think, "God has forgotten us, we are going through this time of persecution, and though we pray the persecution carries on." God has gives us many promises within the Scriptures. Has God forgotten them? And we might want to think about that. There might be a person at work who has a very deep in tray, which you left pretty empty before your vacation, but is now piled high with all sorts of things. And there are inevitably things in that in tray as you start your work that you cannot fully understand, perhaps things you might forget in the first few days back. Is it like that with God, as we cry out to him in our times of distress and he doesn't seem to remember us? And yet the day of judgement will reveal that the LORD will keep all of his covenant promises. We read in v16, *'The LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.'* We read in v17, *'Then you will know that I, the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy. Never again will the foreigners invade her'* And in v20, *'Judah will be inhabited for ever and Jerusalem through all generations.'* You see at that day we will know that God has not forgotten one of his children. We will know that God has not forgotten one of all his promises. We know that now by faith. We know that God is trustworthy and we treasure His word. But on that day all will be revealed and we will see Him keeping all His promises

## **iii) We will see that the LORD is gracious and generous**

Again we might be tempted to say when we go through difficulties in the Christian life that God is very hard and ungenerous. He doesn't give me what I need or what I want. He seems to withhold good things from me, and so I pray to him and God doesn't seem to answer, though my prayers seem very reasonable. And my life is very hard. I am going through difficulties and God doesn't seem very close to me. It is a bit like a teenager might feel about their parents not giving them all that they want and thinking that their parents are totally ungenerous and unsympathetic in every shape or form. And so we feel in some senses like that about our God. And though we know by faith that God is gracious and generous to us, we will on that day, that final day, see and experience God's mercy and forgiveness. Look at v21, *'Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned I will pardon'* and these wonderful words in v18, *'In that day*

*the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the LORD's house and will water the valley of acacias.'* Where there was once drought and famine because of the locusts there is now this picture of prosperity and of beauty and in contrast Egypt being desolate and Edom a desert waste. It is picture of God's generosity, of the wonder of His grace being poured out, something we will experience on that day.

And so until that day we walk by faith. We know by faith that the LORD is living, but we do not see Him. We know by faith that His word is reliable, but then we will see every one of His words being fulfilled. We know by faith the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ, that our sins are forgiven, but it is by faith. Then, we will receive that marvellous entrance into our promised land, a new heaven and a new earth. And all of these things will be revealed on that day of judgement. And so can you see why chapter three, this awesome day of judgement, is actually a message of good news; good news to God's people who are going through difficult days, good news to God's people who are suffering, good news to God's people who are facing injustice, good news to those of us who struggle as we walk by faith because it is the day that all these wonderful things about God as our Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit will be revealed to us in all their splendour and glory.

## **Conclusion**

And so how do we relate to this great day of the LORD at the end of time? First we **warn** people, we encourage everybody to call on the name of the Lord while there is time. But also we **welcome** that day, as it will be the day when we no longer walk by faith but we will see all these treasures that have been promised to us for ever.

I have just finished reading a book called 'Galileo's Daughter' about how he used to intrigue the local Venetians by pointing his new telescope out towards the Adriatic and telling them about the ships coming over the horizon before they were visible to the naked eye. He was able to proclaim the future that was coming over the horizon because he had this means of seeing over it through his telescope. And through God's word we also have that means. We can, through God's word by his Spirit, see over the horizon. And the view is something that we will want to warn others about, but also welcome as we see that the Lord will return. And may we not forget the suffering church throughout the world. As we pray for the suffering church and help them in other ways may we be able to encourage them that this day of judgement will be their day of vindication, the day that they need to look forward to. AMEN