

## **The Worst Hard Time: Stop Fighting and Find Refuge**

***Joel 3:1-16***

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,**

**March 5, 2023**

### **Read the text**

#### **Restoration**

We start a new section here in Joel 3. The syntax and the semantics shift, and we see a shift in interest, in focus. We start with God's promise of future restoration. That is the driving theme of the book of Joel.

Restoration. And as we consider this, we are also to ask ourselves, "How can God give back what was lost?" How can God give back what you lost? How can God restore?

In Joel, there has been real loss suffered in the first chapters of the book. We have seen God begin to put some of these losses back right. The phrase we translate as "restore the fortunes" indicates hardship and loss. God's people have struggled with suffering and here we have this promise of future restoration. As God is promising restoration, he then moves into judgment against the nations.

God says, "I will gather all the nations." For Joel's audience, their thoughts turn to those neighboring kingdoms who taunted Israel, who divided up their lands, who devastated the people. Just as God's people were gathered together in Jerusalem in chapter two to pray in the face of devastation, God gathers these other nations.

For us today, we need to understand that this gathering of nations continues and is inclusive of nations such as the United States of America, Russia, Ukraine, Great Britain, China, India, etc. God is saying that he will gather all the nations and we see Joel begin to present a picture of what this judgment on the nations looks like.

What is the biggest crowd you've ever been a part of? Perhaps it was at a sporting event. I've been to a few football games where over 75,000 were in attendance. We see the scope of the crowds in the World Cup or at the Olympics. Those were some big crowds. Joel 3 speaks of a much larger gathering, one so big on scope that only God himself could orchestrate.

And where will this take place? No clue. Joel speaks about “the Valley of Jehoshaphat” (Joel 3:2). Except that there really isn’t a place on the maps with that name. And this is the only time we see it used in Scripture.

Perhaps the significance is found in the name instead of the place. Jehoshaphat was the fourth king of Judah, and his name means “God has judged.” So when God says, “I will bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat,” we understand that God will bring them to the place of judgment and enter into judgment with all people there.

This picture Joel describes is of a huge multitude of people wedged into this valley, this space. Across the valley from this massive sea of humanity is God himself, as he enters into judgment with all of the nations.

God’s judgment of the nations is connected especially to the way the nations have mistreated God’s people. “I will enter into judgment with them there on behalf of my people, my inheritance Israel...” (Joel 3:2). God is making it clear that, in his omniscience, He is aware of all of the horrendous and great evil perpetrated against God’s people, from the Old Testament until even now. God knows about all of the evils and Joel reminds us that God will not ever forget. Every evil, vile, sinful thing that has been done will one day be brought into account.

Beginning in verse 3, God lays out like the prosecution in court all of the charges against the nations. For example, what we would call human trafficking that had occurred in the Old Testament and continues today: “They cast lots for my people; they bartered a boy for a prostitute and sold a girl for wine to drink.” (Joel 3:3). In the Hebrew, it literally reads “the boy and the girl,” the definite article indicating the entire class of both male and female children.

There will be judgment on the disregard for the value of human life, especially that of the young. They squander their future on something that is fleeting – temporary pleasures and the lies of a distorted culture.

### **The Justice to Come**

From time to time, I bet each of us have wondered if there will ever be justice, full, complete justice in this world. Joel answers the question for us: Yes. God himself will bring justice:

In his sermon in Athens, Paul tells his audience that God “has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). On that day, God will gather all the nations, all people, and he will proclaim judgment against all sins.

Joel lists many of these terrible evils in chapter 3 but that is certainly not the limit or extent of the sin that will be judged. Do you see how God describes the evil? “...the harvest is ripe...the winepress is full; the wine vats overflow because the wickedness of the nations is extreme.” (Joel 3:13)

The media keeps some evils in front of us. A mass shooting occurs and we are inundated with news about it. And then that fades as another takes its place. Evil is extreme, overflowing, so much so that we tend to forget about some of it. Perhaps we forget about genocides in places like Rwanda, Cambodia, or Armenia. We may have forgotten evil like that. Joel lets us know that God has not. He has not nor will he ever forget that evil.

The Scripture teaches that God has books and a bottle. God records all human evil in the books, according to Revelation 20:12. “...Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.” And the David writes in Psalm 56: “You yourself have recorded my wanderings. Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” (Psalm 56:8)

Despite what we may think, every single act of human wickedness, violence and cruelty is fully known to the Lord. God also knows the full effect of evil in terms of how much it hurts people and brings them sorrow. God sees all of the great evils of human life and never forgets any of them. On that day, in the valley of judgment, God will open the books and account for every sin, every evil, every illegal act – every tear in God’s bottle will be accounted for in judgment.

For those wondering why there should be a judgment, that is the answer. “Their wickedness is extreme.” (Joel 3:13). That evil, that wickedness, that sin is carved into both human nature and human history to such a deep degree that restoration is impossible for us without judgment.

The restoration of Judah and Jerusalem in Joel 3:1, happens through the gathering for judgment in verse 2. Evil just keeps on going and going, multiplying in every generation.

This judgment will happen. The same God who says, “I will restore the years that the locusts have eaten” (Joel 2:25), and “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh” (2:28), also says, “I will gather all the nations” and, “I will enter into judgment with them.”

### **What the Judgment Will Be Like**

“Proclaim this among the nations...” Joel 3:9

What God says is to be “proclaimed” to every single person. This judgment will touch every life. It’s not limited to any specific culture. This message needs to be shared with every single person. Consider the picture Joel paints.

### **A Huge Crowd Is Gathered**

*Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. Joel 3:14*

Can you see this massive crowd in this valley? It is more than you and I could even count. God will gather the nations for judgment.

### **They are Armed for a Fight**

*Beat your plows into swords, and your pruning knives into spears. Joel 3:10*

What Joel says here is the opposite of the famous words of Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3.

*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Micah 4:3).*

There will be a day when people won’t go to war against one another. Even the nations that have been in peacetime will go to war against God instead, and they will have weapons: Swords made from plows and spears made from pruning knives.

Can you picture that? It is an incredible image. The nations have gathered against God. They have armed themselves, but it is pointless because there is no weapon invented that can even dent the throne of the Most High God. And yet in this picture, the nations come armed to fight God with swords and spears. This is a ridiculous and hopeless picture.

And still the entire human race has rolled out for this fight. “Let all the men of war advance and attack!” (Joel 3:9). Even the timid join the ranks. “Let even the weakling say ‘I am a warrior.’” (Joel 3:10). The battle lines are set. On one side are a vast multitude of both strong and weak, armed with the best weapons they can muster. On the other side, God alone. And it is not a fair fight.

The extraordinary thing is that God is not even standing up: “Let the nations be roused and come to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit down to judge all the surrounding nations.” (Joel 3:12)

Millions and millions are armed and ready to fight God. And God doesn’t even need to stand up.

And then, after the lines are drawn, look at what happens next. “The Lord will roar from Zion and make his voice from Jerusalem; heaven and earth will shake...The sun and moon will grow dark, and the stars will cease their shining.” (Joel 3:16, 15).

The lights go out. God roars a command. “Swing the sickle because the harvest is ripe. Come and trample the grapes because the winepress is full; the wine vats overflow because the wickedness of the nations is extreme.” (Joel 3:13).

Please know that I believe that the Bible is the Word of God. It is inerrant, infallible, without mixture of error. That means that I believe that what God says here will happen one day. I am scared for those who don’t believe that. Many of you also believe in God and the Bible. However, today you are stuck in some sort of argument, conflict, or disagreement with God. You are mad at God because you think He owes you something better than what you’ve got. Maybe you think God owes you some explanation, like Job. Maybe you think God owes you something that you lost. Or someone.

There you are. Standing there across the battle line from God, with your little sword and your makeshift spear ready to take on Almighty God. Think about that. Is that you today? How silly does that image look? Take some advice from a former moron who knows, the sooner you end your conflict with God, the better your life will be. Because this is a fight you simply cannot win.

Look, Job was much better than you and I are. Job was a pious believer, a blameless man. And Job attempted to bring his case against the ways and the wisdom of God. And then Job finally saw who God was and what exactly he was up against, Job said: “I had heard reports about you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I reject my words and I am sorry for them; I am dust and ashes.” (Job 42:5-6) Job said, “I surrender. I cannot win this fight.” Let Joel lead you to the same understanding. Find refuge and restoration today.

*“But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the Israelites.” Joel 3:16*

A refuge is where you go to find safety in the face of impending disaster. Listen to God’s direct promise to you. God says, “I am your refuge.” There are two truths that exist together concerning Joel 3. The Lord is the judge everyone should fear, and He is also the refuge everyone must seek.

“God is our refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble. Therefore we will not be afraid, though the earth trembles and the mountains topple into the depths of the seas, though its water roars and foams and the mountains quake with its turmoil.” (Psalm 46:1-3)

How can the One who judges also become the refuge from his judgment? That question leads us to the heart of the gospel. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood, received through faith as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:23-25) That is why you need refuge.

Everything you have said and thought and done is written in His book. So many sins and God knows them all. When he enters into judgment with all nations and with all people, you are included. But God presented Christ – he put Jesus forward to take your place and become your refuge.

That means that the judgment that is due to sinners on the day of the Lord was passed on to Jesus Christ when he died on the cross. On the cross Jesus made two things possible: You can be forgiven and experience the restoration of peace with God that had been lost because of the many sins.

You can be forgiven, and you can be redeemed. Redemption means that when Jesus died and rose again, he bought people back for himself.

That makes all who receive salvation by grace through faith His own. It is a free gift, but it certainly wasn't cheap. Today, if you have never received salvation through faith, stop fighting against God. Instead, seek out refuge and safety in Him. Become believing in Christ and serve Jesus as Lord.

Do this so that on the day of judgment, you can experience the blessing of the promise in Romans 8: "Therefore, there is **NOW NO CONDEMNATION** for those in Christ Jesus."

**FURTHER THOUGHTS:**

Do you remember being in any fights or arguments? Did you win or lose?  
Have you lost an argument recently?

Where are the safe places you go to in your life? (they might be a place, a person, a piece of media or entertainment) Why do you go there for refuge?

What arguments or disagreements or conflicts have you had with God?

We need to be careful being “mad” at God because so often we are convinced that God has done something that hurt us and therefore our anger is justifiable. While God can handle our anger, I am not sure that we can. How have you seen anger against God be counterproductive for faith?

How do you feel when you read how God communicated in Joel 3:16?



**ANNOUNCEMENTS:****SILVER WINGS SPRING SPUDS: Wednesday March 15<sup>th</sup> at noon.**

Join us in room 101 at noon as we gather for lunch together and a surprise game. We will provide cheese, sour cream, bacon, chives, and butter for the potatoes. If you would like a different topping and can provide enough for everyone, please note it on the sign-up sheet!

**WE NEED CANDY DONATIONS for the Easter Hunts we are having this year!** Individually wrapped candies, please. Bring them to the church and drop them off in the buckets provided! We also need non-candy prizes for families who are careful to avoid specific dyes and ingredients that may be counter-productive to their children. We need either all natural fruit snacks or toys, bouncing balls, fidgets etc. If you need some ideas, call the office or Pastors Craig or Jason.

**Easter Egg Hunt Outreach for Families of Special Needs Children. March 25<sup>th</sup> at 10:30AM.** Sign up to volunteer today!

**EASTER FLOWER ORDERS.** Orders will be taken through Sunday March 19<sup>th</sup>. Order forms are available and can be turned into the office or prayer boxes. 6 1/2" flowers are \$10 each: Tulips, hyacinths, and daffodils are available.

**VBS VOLUNTEER MEETING: MARCH 26<sup>th</sup> at 10AM in the Fellowship Hall.** This will be a brief information meeting for all who are interested in serving during Vacation Bible School on June 19-23.