

Tonight, we are talking about the final judgment.

It’s a fitting theme for the last sermon of the year.

The book of Joel calls the people of God to humble themselves before God.

Judgment Day is coming –

the Day of the LORD – the great and awesome day.

Everything around you – in your work, your schooling, your friends –

would try to convince you that the Day of the LORD is just a myth.

But Joel says, remember the locust plague?

Remember Hurricane Sandy?

Remember the New Zealand earthquake?

Judgment Day is coming!

Introduction: “The Great and Awesome Day of the LORD” (2:28-32)

What is the “great and awesome day of the LORD”?

The Day of the LORD is the theme of the whole book of Joel.

The locust plague is a sign – pointing to the Day of the LORD.

But the Day of the LORD is the day when God comes in judgment.

We saw last time that the cross of Christ demonstrated

that the Day of the LORD has come upon Jesus,

as the sun was darkened.

Three times in the book of Joel, there is a reference to the darkening of the sun.

Chapter 2:10 – “The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble.

The sun and moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining...

For the day of the LORD is great and very awesome; who can endure it?”

[Here Joel is talking about the locust plague]

Chapter 2:30 – “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth,
blood and fire and columns of smoke.

The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,

before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”

[Here Joel is talking about the cross.]

Chapter 3:14-15 – “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.”

[Here Joel is talking about the final judgment of the nations.]

The language used in Joel draws on the language of Exodus 19.

In Exodus 19:9, the LORD said to Moses,
“Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud,
that the people may hear when I speak with you,
and may also believe you forever.”
And so God told Moses to have the people “consecrate themselves”
so that they could meet with their God.

And on the morning of the third day (Exodus 19:16, 18),
“there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain
and a very loud trumpet blast,
so that all the people in the camp trembled....
Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke
because the LORD had descended on it in fire.”

This is precisely the language used in Joel.
<http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV7N3A1.asp>

But I'd like to point out that in 2:31 the Day of the LORD has a couple modifiers:
“great” and “awesome.”

What is the significance of calling this day the “great and awesome” day of the LORD?
A “great” day does not necessarily mean a “good” day.
Rather, a great day is one where some great and mighty thing happens
(either good or bad).

“Awesome” is more difficult.
The word is simply the verb “to fear” or “to be afraid” in a participle form
(a participle is a verbal adjective).
The participle here could be translated “terrible” or “awesome.”
The problem is that “terrible” has lost all sense of “terror.”
We speak of an actor’s terrible performance without the slightest emotion!
Of course, “awesome” has equally lost all sense of “awe”!

The great and awesome day of the LORD is a day filled with mighty deeds
and a day that will strike awe and terror into the hearts of men!

It is a day very much like the day at Mt Sinai,
when Israel saw the fire and smoke and thick clouds
as the LORD descended upon the mountain.

There are more than 30 other uses of this participle in the OT – including:
Genesis 28:17 -- "How *awesome* is this place"
(Jacob when he sees the angels ascending and descending on the ladder at Bethel).
Exodus 15:11 -- (the Song of Moses after the destruction of Pharaoh's army)
"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness, *awesome* in glorious deeds,

doing wonders?"

Psalms 68:35 -- "Awesome is God from his sanctuary"

(There are another dozen usages like this in the Psalms)

And twice in Joel 2:

Joel 2:11 -- "For the day of the LORD is great and very *awesome*; who can endure it?"

Joel 2:31 -- "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,

before the great and *awesome* day of the LORD comes"

(also, Malachi 4:5 -- "I will send you Elijah the prophet

before the great and *awesome* day of the LORD comes").

So the day of the LORD is the day of judgment –

it is the day when God comes to make everything right.

Therefore, it is truly a "fearful" day.

No one will be standing around with a "ho-hum" attitude on that day!

But *when* is the day of the LORD?

As we saw last week, Peter's point in Acts 2 is that the day of the Lord has come!

The "great and magnificent day"

(he follows the Septuagint translation -- the Greek translation -- of Joel 2)

has come in Jesus Christ.

The great and terrible day (the final judgment) *has happened* to Jesus.

He has endured the eschatological wrath of God,

so that those who are united to him through faith,

might be delivered from "the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

The description of the judgment of the nations is what Joel 3 is all about.

1. "When I Restore the Fortunes of Jerusalem": The Judgment of the Nations (3:1-8)

a. The Reason for God's Judgment: The Nations Have Scattered My People and Divided My Land (v1-3)

"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,³ 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.

God says that "in those days and at that time" –

in other words, when he pours out the Holy Spirit –

when God shows wonders in the heavens and on the earth –

"when I restore the fortunes of Judah of Jerusalem."

This language of "restoring fortunes" could also be translated "restoring the captivity" –

it is "return from exile" sort of language.

If you think about the opening of the book of Acts,
this is the reason why the disciples asked Jesus in chapter 1,
“Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

If the resurrection of Jesus is the return from Exile and the coming of the Day of the Lord
then the next thing in redemptive history is the final judgment of the nations.

And that’s true.
The next thing in redemptive history *is* the final judgment of the nations!
Throughout the book of Acts, that is the message of the apostles.

We live in the last days!
We live “in those days” when God is gathering the nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat!
Jehoshaphat means “Yahweh will judge.”
You may recall from Kings and Chronicles that Jehoshaphat was a good king,
who won a great victory over Moab, Ammon, and Edom
(after Jehoshaphat, those countries broke away from Israelite rule).

The Valley of Jehoshaphat may refer to a particular valley,
but the meaning of the name – Yahweh will judge – is the central point.

God says that when he pours out his Spirit – when he shows his great wonders –
when the great and terrible Day of the LORD comes –
then he will judge the nations.

Yahweh will judge.

So you see a picture of Yahweh sitting on his throne in the Valley of Jehoshaphat,
and all the nations coming before him for judgment.

How will he judge them?

Verse 2 gives the general criteria:
*“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 God emphasizes the people and the land.

We saw last time that God was jealous for his land – and had pity on his people.
God doesn’t like it when other gods try to take over his turf.
The nations will be judged for mistreating the people of God.

People sometimes ask, “What does this mean for Israel today?”
Paul says in Romans 11
that Gentile believers have been grafted in to Israel’s olive tree,
and unbelieving Jews have been “cut off.”

So unbelieving Jews today are “natural branches”
that are not currently connected to the tree.
Unbelieving Israel today are dead olive branches.
The only way that they can participate in God’s covenant blessings
is by believing in the Son of David – our Lord Jesus –
and being re-grafted into the olive tree.
The modern nation of Israel does not deserve any “special treatment”
for theological reasons.

At the same time, it is not accurate to say that the church has “replaced” Israel.
Rather, Gentiles have been grafted *into* Israel –
so that we now participate in God’s covenant blessings
the same way as the Jews –
by believing in the Son of David – our Lord Jesus.

And therefore, when God says that he will gather the nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat
and judge them for how they have treated his people and his land,
that includes us!

But verse 2 is rather general.

If God had only said, “because they have scattered my people and divided up my land,”
then we could think that he is only referring to the actions of generals and kings.

But God gets rather specific in verse 3:

*“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.”*

This gets personal.

God is not just concerned with the systemic evils of the nations of the earth.
He is also concerned with the personal evils of individuals who do nasty things!

God has said at the end of chapter 2 that when *he* pours out his Spirit,
the sons and daughters will prophesy.
That is how *he* treats the children of Jerusalem.

Compare that with the nations!

God has a quarrel with the nations because of how the nations have treated his children!

Jesus says, in Matthew 25, that insofar as you have done it to the least of these my brethren,
you have done it to me.

In Matthew 25, Jesus makes it clear that the criterion for the final judgment
is how you have treated his people!

Part of the reason why I am convinced that the Minor Prophets (the Book of the Twelve)
was arranged in a particular order for a reason

is because when you turn the page, you find that Amos 1-2 will go into particular detail regarding the despicable practices of the nations – regarding how they have treated Israel (and each other)!

Joel sets up Amos beautifully.

God is the covenant Lord of his people.

He is honor-bound to protect and defend them.

Any attack or mistreatment of his people is an attack on God himself.

(Incidentally, Amos will zero in on *Israel's* mistreatment of *each other* as the most heinous attack on God himself!

Husbands, your wife belongs to God.

He is her covenant Lord.

If you mistreat her, God will defend her.)

Now, it's true that *all people* were made in the image of God, so we should never mistreat anyone!,

but those who have been renewed after the image of God are God's special people;

he is honor-bound to defend those

who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

And then in verses 4-8, God explains the means of his judgment:

God will do unto others what they have done unto him!

b. The Means of God's Judgment: I Will Do to You as You Have Done to Them (v4-8)

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. ⁵ For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. ⁶ You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their own border. 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. ⁸ I 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.”

Tyre, Sidon and Philistia are three of the traditional enemies of Israel.

But the Greeks and the Sabeans are distant nations.

The Greeks are far to the west, across the Mediterranean.

The Sabeans are far to the south, across the Arabian desert (modern Yemen).

The idea is that just as Tyre, Sidon and Philistia (the coastland peoples)

have sold the Jews westward across the sea to the Greeks,

so now the people of Judah will sell their children across the desert.

There is a proportionality to God's judgment on the nations.

God judges the nations according to what they have done to others.
Throughout the scriptures there is a definite emphasis on proportionate judgment.
Dante's *Inferno* described various circles of Hell,
each with their own particular judgments
for people who committed particular sins.
I think he was on to something.
God does not give us lots of details about Hell,
but one consistent detail about God's justice is that he judges
according to what they have done.
And the punishment tends to fit the crime.

I would suggest that Hell is a place where people experience others doing unto them
what they have done to others.

Verses 9-16 then speak of the method, timing, and location of God's judgment,
as Joel calls the nations to assemble:

2. "The Day of the LORD Is Near in the Valley of Decision": The Refuge of the Cross (3:9-16)

a. The Method of God's Judgment: Trial by Combat (v9-12)

⁹ *Proclaim this among the nations:*

Consecrate for war;^[c]

stir up the mighty men.

Let all the men of war draw near;

let them come up.

¹⁰ *Beat your plowshares into swords,
and your pruning hooks into spears;
let the weak say, "I am a warrior."*

Jerusalem was told to consecrate a fast – to turn to the LORD and plead for mercy.
The nations are told to consecrate a war!

God says, "bring it on!"

Send me your finest warriors –
and put together your largest armies.

Beat your plowshares into swords – so that you can equip even the weak.

¹¹ *Hasten and come,
all you surrounding nations,
and gather yourselves there.*

Bring down your warriors, O LORD.

¹² *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.*

All the surrounding nations are to assemble their warriors.

Why?

Because Yahweh is summoning them to a trial by combat.

Goliath did this with David.

Goliath had issued a challenge to single combat – winner take all!

It was a common practice in the ancient world.

It was a good way to avoid massive slaughter,
and if both sides were confident in their champion,
they would think it a good bet!

So Yahweh summons the nations to bring their warriors,

and Joel calls upon the LORD in verse 11,

“Bring down your warriors, O LORD!”

Since Hebrew distinguishes between “you singular” and “you plural” –

it is very clear that the verse part of verse 11 is addressed to the nations (plural),
and the second part to the LORD (singular).

The nations are to assemble in the Valley of Jehoshaphat,

for there the LORD will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.

There will be a trial – trial by combat –

between the Divine Warrior and the armies of the nations.

b. The Timing of God’s Judgment: the Harvest Is Ripe (v13)

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.

Verse 11 summoned the warriors of the LORD.

Verse 13 says what they will do.

It is harvest time! – time to bring an end to the wicked!

(Revelation will take a similar approach to the harvest image)

We saw in chapters 1-2 how the bounty of grain, wine, and oil is part of God’s blessing.

But there is another harvest!

The judgment is also a harvest image –

the winepress is full – and the vats overflow

“for their evil is great.”

You reap what you sow!

If you have sown ambition and strife,

then you will reap ambition and strife!

If you have sown envy and gossip,
then you will reap envy and gossip!

And Joel says that when the evil deeds of the nations overflow from their vats,
that will be the time for judgment.

And so Joel declares that the Day of the LORD will come in the Valley of Decision:

c. The Location of God's Judgment: the Valley of Decision (v14-16)

¹⁴ *Multitudes, multitudes,
in the valley of decision!
For the day of the LORD is near
in the valley of decision.*

¹⁵ *The sun and the moon are darkened,
and the stars withdraw their shining.*

The nations will gather for war –
but then they will be terrified by the coming of the Great and Terrible Day of the LORD.
The Day of the LORD will come in the Valley of Decision.

The trial by battle will end with a verdict for the Divine Warrior.

¹⁶ *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.*

I mentioned earlier the connections between the end of Joel and the beginning of Amos.
The first two lines of 3:16 are a direct quotation from Amos 1:2.
Amos 1-2 uses the image of a lion stalking its prey.
Joel sets this up by saying that the LORD roars from Zion.

Jerusalem will never be overthrown so long as the voice of the LORD is heard in Zion.

The nations in the Valley of Decision are terrified and destroyed by the Day of the LORD –
but the quaking of the earth and heavens are a comfort and a refuge to the people of God.

Hebrews 12 quotes from Haggai,

“Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.”

Hebrews goes on to say,

“This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken –
that is, things that have been made –
in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,
and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,

for our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:26-29)

What can endure the shaking of heaven and earth?

Only something that is beyond heaven and earth!

Joel says that the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.

When all the heavens and the earth are shaking –

when the sun and moon stop shining, and thick darkness covers the earth,
your only refuge is the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us!

Because Jesus has endured the Day of the LORD!

He has already passed through the final judgment,

as he endured the trial by combat.

And though he was slain by the combined powers of the Jews and the Gentiles –

though he was mistreated and abused by the nations –

yet he triumphed over them *through* the cross.

And because he has triumphed, he is a rock and fortress – a refuge for his people
against the devastation of this age.

3. “The LORD Dwells in Zion”: No More Strangers (3:17-21)

a. The Result of God’s Judgment: Jerusalem Shall Be Holy (v17-18)

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.

Verses 17-21 then conclude with a vision of the twofold *result* of God’s judgment.

Jerusalem shall be holy, and Judah shall be inhabited.

You see again the weaving together of the themes of land and seed.

When God judges the nations and restores the fortunes of his people,

thus shall you know that “I am the LORD your God,
who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain.”

And when God dwells in Zion, Jerusalem shall be holy –

strangers shall never again pass through it.

You might think that this is a little odd.

After all, scripture prizes hospitality – “love of strangers”!

The Law of Moses had said that the stranger should be treated with kindness.

But this is not the word used in the Law of Moses!

The “stranger” of the Law of Moses is the “gur” – the sojourner.

Joel speaks of the *zarim*.

The Law uses this word only to describe the “strange fire” of Nadab and Abihu.
This is the word used for the alien – the foreigner –
overwhelmingly the *hostile stranger*
who seeks to pervert and destroy the people of God.
(The word is used almost entirely by the prophets speaking of hostile enemies –
or in Ezekiel 16, to speak of how Jerusalem runs after strangers
rather than her own husband).
Hosea spoke of how Israel has borne “alien children” (5:7).

So yes, you are supposed to *love* the sojourner – (and we get plenty of practice here!)
but you should not welcome the hostile stranger who seeks to overthrow the church!

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.*

Take comfort!

The day is coming when God will make all things right!
Peace and plenty will be for all of God’s people in the final day!

The Valley of Shittim (or the Valley of Acacias) is otherwise unknown
(like the Valley of Jehoshaphat!).

But with the introduction of a third Valley, perhaps you can see
that we don’t need to know an exact geographical spot.

The Valley of Jehoshaphat is the Valley where the LORD shall judge.
The Valley of Decision (or the Valley of the Verdict)
is where God judges his enemies;
and the Valley of Shittim (the Valley of Acacias)
is where God blesses his people.

In that day – the day when the Valley of Decision overflows with the blood of the wicked,
in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and a fountain will come forth from the house of the LORD
and water the Valley of Acacias!

The bloody harvest of the wicked
will be paralleled with the bountiful harvest of righteousness in the land.

Think of the parallel feasts at the end of the Book of Revelation.
There is the wedding supper of the Lamb – where we are the Bride,

and all the hosts of heaven rejoice at the marriage of the Lamb;

but there is also the great supper of our God –
where the wicked are the main course,
devoured by the birds of the heavens.

And you hear in verse 19 the result for Egypt and Edom:

b. The Result of God's Judgment: Judah Shall Be Inhabited (v19-21)

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.*

Verse 19 speaks of Edom –
setting us up for next week, when we turn to the book of Obadiah.

What nation can avoid this verdict?
What nation can claim that they have not shed innocent blood?
What nation can say that they have not mistreated the church?

All the nations of the earth deserve to be hurled into the Valley of Decision!

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

²¹ *I will avenge their blood,
blood I have not avenged,^[d]
for the LORD dwells in Zion.”*

And we have God's promise in verses 20-21 that Jerusalem will be inhabited for all generations,
a promise that John sees fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22).

And God promises that he *will* avenge the blood of his people because he dwells in Zion.

John's vision of the souls under the altar comes immediately to mind:

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge
and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10)

The saints are not concerned for personal vendettas.

They are concerned for the holiness and veracity of God himself.
We saw last time that God is motivated by his own glory.
Well, that should motivate us as well!

The prophet Joel reminds us that the disasters – the evils – that we encounter
are but foretastes and signs of the coming Day of the LORD.

Therefore, we must return to the LORD,
call upon him – trust him – believe him – love him!