

Far Horizon

- The Judgment of the Nations

Joel 3:1-21

Introduction The Nuremberg trials as a means of dealing with the atrocities at a national scale...

The failure of the world court to adequately address similar genocides in our day...

But God is not so bound. There will come a day when the nations will be judged for all their rebellion against God.



Further, you must not hear the terms “nations” here to refer exclusively to geographic groups and national boundaries. This term has the same force of when we use nations as a target for the evangelism. We are talking about people groups and the individuals that make them. So, it is the people and their leaders who will be gathered in the valley of God’s judgment.

But consider that God has already begun his judgment at the cross. Remember our text from last week?

³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ³² And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

The New Testament understands this passage, in the light of the unfolding purposes of God in Christ. It ties the passage to the return of Christ in several texts¹. But the Bible teaching on the end times is complex, holding that the last days began in the first coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new era, while the old age is still rolling on (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:17). So Joel 2:28–32 is interpreted in this light, especially in Peter’s speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21, 33, 38–40). Peter was claiming that God’s final work had begun in the filling of the disciples with the Holy Spirit and in the offer of salvation for those who believed. The earthly and heavenly signs and wonders are linked with the miracles done by Jesus and evidently with the darkness at the crucifixion. The phrase ‘all flesh’ is expanded to include both Israel and Gentile converts to Judaism.

Later, in Romans 10:12–13, Paul argued that in the New Covenant ‘all flesh’ should be interpreted as both wider and narrower than the Jewish nation. To this

end he connected Joel 2:32 with Is. 28:16 linking it with the doctrine of justification for all believers established in Rom. 4. Now the chosen people of God are no longer a physical nation, but a multi-ethnic kingdom made up of regenerated believers. 'All flesh' includes Israel but a greater Israel. Both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus are now the present people of God.²

So let's look together at the far horizon of the Day of the Lord in the judgment of the nations.

The Declaration by the Lord

(v.1-8)

From the great invitation by the Lord to a grand declaration by the Lord, Joel moves in his prophecy. Note the switch from poetry to narrative. Why did Joel make this switch? What is being highlighted with this rhetorical device?

He prophesies about the nations and His deliverance of His people.

He speaks to the nations and warns them of His coming judgments.

His Agenda

(v.1-3)

"For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, 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 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.

First, God declares His agenda. Note that the text opens with a connective, "for". Those who believe in the name of the Lord will escape and survive. What will they escape? The judgment of God.

In the days and at that time when God restores the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, He will judge the nations, bringing them into the valley of God's judgment (Jehoshaphat). God will judge all the nations who scattered the Jews, divided up their land and sold their children into slave trade. This has a near and far fulfillment. Ultimately it will be fulfilled when God judges the nations on the Day of the Lord and casts unbelievers into the lake of fire.

His Accusation

(v.4-8)

God is furious concerning Israel's past and future mistreatment by the pagan Gentiles. So, God levels His accusations against nations that allied themselves with Babylon and had harassed the Jews upon their return from exile.

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."

For all of the crimes against God's people and all the sin and rebellion against God, He will enter into judgment against them. Now, this is not a dispassionate

meting out of a legal decision and sentence. No, this is the fury and wrath of God who stands to vindicate His Name and to enact justice for His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God who is going to punish you as a law-breaker and who is going to deal with you according to your deeds and deserts.

The Day of the Lord **(v.9-16)**

The final day of the Lord is unfolded in all its awful glory and grandeur.

His Announcement **(v.9–11)**

These pagan Gentiles are warned to prepare for the worst, for God himself will soon battle against them.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Beat 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.

Here God is throwing down the gauntlet. He is challenging the nations to come out to fight. It is time for the great and final showdown. Arm yourselves with everything you have. Bring both weak and strong. Gather yourselves – do you think you can defeat God? Will the leaders of the world actually think that they can make war on and bring down the God of the universe?

Their Assembling **(v.12)**

God plans to meet his enemies in the valley of Jehoshaphat so he can destroy them.

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.

God will bring the nations before Him in judgment. They are “invited” to come to this valley of judgment, but they will all come. The language here is meant to invoke this great assembling of two armies. But one is an army of One and He is enthroned, commanding their obedience and fealty.

Their Annihilation**(13–16)**

His enemies will be crushed like overripe grapes.

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.

Here are three dark and terrible stanzas, powerful and frightening in their imagery. This valley of judgment is seen first as a vast wheat field. The mighty sickle of God's judgment scythes through the field, cutting down every last one of the unbelievers. And it is seen as a great vat, filled to the brim with harvested grapes where God treads on them and their blood runs over like juice fresh from the winepress.

But then, in a curious turn of phrase, Joel points to the fact that God has issued His verdict. It is important that you do not hear this phrase, "the valley of decision" as referring to decisions the people make. The common portrayal of this as the decision that the lost make for God is simply wrong. The decision here is a verdict, a decision rendered by a court. The unbelievers are gathered in the valley of judgment where God will issue His verdict.

Verse 15, alluding to Joel 2:31, foreshadows the massive scope and scale of this awful judgment. It begins on a hill called Mt. Calvary where the perfect, incarnate, sinless Son of God is judged for the sins of His people. It ends when the Lord returns from Zion as a victorious, roaring Lion with all creation quaking under His feet.

But in all this, God is a refuge for His people. He has provided for their safety, deliverance and protection from His wrath. He has spent it for them on His own Son. So, in that final day, they are gathered as a people whose verdict against them and punishment of them has been satisfied by the Lord Jesus.

Yes, His people are gathered before the judge of the universe on that dreadful day. But they are not there as the wicked to be trampled by the wrath of God. They are gathered as redeemed sons and servants, sealed by the Spirit and hidden safely in Christ, our sure and steadfast stronghold.

The Dwelling of the Lord

(v.17–21)

How do we know that the blessings promised are not just for a nation called Israel and an ethnic group called Jews? Joel sees the blending of the two horizons but we can distinguish the glory of the second and third in the light of Christ and His cross.

His Presence among His People

(v.17)

¹⁷So 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.

As a result of what God will do to judge the wicked and to shelter His people, they will have a firm assurance that God is their Lord. What will they learn and what will it mean? They will learn that God dwells in Zion, His holy mountain. Because of Hebrews 12 and many other New Testament texts, we know that the city of God is in the new creation that is begun in the very midst of the old creation with the regeneration and salvation and indwelling of His people. He does not merely dwell in a city in Palestine called Jerusalem; He dwells in Zion, the city of God which one day will be full seen as coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband.

What God does to dwell among His people brings about a great change. What is referred to in the second sentence of verse 17 would not even really be possible if it is referring to the physical city here on earth in any age. But if the fulfillment of this promise is enlarged to include what the New Testament envisions, then we see the promise will be fulfilled on a massive scale not imaginable by the Jews of Joel's day. There will come a day where the holy city of God will the dwelling place, not only of God, but also solely for the members, the true Spirit born citizens of that realm.

His Provision for His People

(v.18–19)

Ah, what great blessing and bounty will fill that dwelling place on that day.

¹⁸And 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.
¹⁹Egypt 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.

Leslie Allen, in the New Bible Commentary, helpfully points out:

The agricultural blessings belong to the land-based theology of the OT as tokens of covenant fellowship between God and his people. The promise goes on to include the healing of their emotional wounds, by decreeing barrenness for *Egypt* and *Edom* as punishment for crimes committed on Judean soil (*cf.* 2 Kings 23:29–34; Obadiah. 10). As two nations were singled out in verses

1–8, so are two others here. These two nations function as typical, long-standing enemies of God’s people. His dealing with them carries an assurance of the total vindication of his people. Their destruction serves as a negative foil for Judah’s blessing in verses 18 and 20–21.³

As we shall see in the book of Revelation, the dwelling place of God, Mount Zion, the new creation, has a stream of living water that flows from the throne. Its waters will flow deeper and wider until the consummation. It will flow from Christ and be given by His hand to His people. Those who drink from it will never thirst again. The imagery here is of a mighty spring of water that will flow from the Temple of God and water even the most desolate places. That stream is flowing from the hand of Christ as the Spirit of God is poured out in our hearts.

The very fulsome delights of the life giving stream will highlight the destitute dryness of Egypt’s false pleasures and Edom’s failing powers. But even further, God will move in judgment to bring to naught all their pleasure and all their power because of their great sins against God and His people.

The Permanence of His People

(v.20–21)

These two verses are parallel to the two before it.

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.”

They are stating much the same thing as verses 18-19. But in each sentence, there is something added that enriches what God is promising.

First, we see that God promises that Judah and Jerusalem will be inhabited forever. This must give us a moment of pause. For those who hold to a literal, future 1000 year reign of Christ in Jerusalem over Israel in the future (commonly called the Millennium), this is an important text. But, I want you to note something. As with almost all the texts in the Old Testament used as a warrant for a Millennium, the promise is *forever*. Now, last I looked, forever is a bit longer than 1,000 years. So these texts may include something literal but cannot be limited to that for it cannot fulfill the promise actually made. Judah and Jerusalem will be filled with people forever. This must cause us to look into the New Testament to see how it understands what these mean. We will do that as come to future studies. For the present, it is my studied opinion that these texts are fulfilled by what God brings in the new creation, the new heavens and new earth.

The second sentence reminds us that God’s justice is all-encompassing. It does vindicate His righteousness and holiness. It does satisfy the demands of His glory and the law. But it is also vengeance. We may not like this. It may seem harsh and even pagan and un-godlike. But this and many like are clear in both the Old and New Testaments. The judgment of God is an expression of wrath and it is a judicial revenge. If your view of God does not have a place for a God of vengeance, then you need to adjust your view of God. Part of God’s vindication is in

His vengeance. And we are not to take revenge on those who sin against us so that God may do so as best suits Him.

The Day of the Lord will then usher in the consummation of God's purposes and promises. Here are the very great mercies and promises from God. He will dwell with His people forever. His people will dwell in His presence forever. And God and His people are vindicated through the judgment God pours out on the wicked.

Reflect and Respond

In closing then, let me take you to a vision that flows from this text into our souls, filling them with the same kind of longing and hope that flooded Joel's hearers. Hear Revelation 21:1-22:5 according to the New Living Translation.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

³I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

⁵And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." ⁶And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. ⁷All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

⁸"But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

⁹Then one of the seven angels who held the seven bowls containing the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come with me! I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb."

¹⁰So he took me in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. ¹¹It shone with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious stone—like jasper as clear as crystal. ¹²The city wall was broad and high, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels. And the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on the gates. ¹³There were three gates on each side—east, north, south, and west. ¹⁴The wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵The angel who talked to me held in his hand a gold measuring stick to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. ¹⁶When he measured it, he found it was a square, as wide as it was long. In fact, its length and width and height were each 1,400 miles. ¹⁷Then he measured the walls and found them to be 216 feet thick (according to the human standard used by the angel).

¹⁸The wall was made of jasper, and the city was pure gold, as clear as glass. ¹⁹The wall of the city was built on foundation stones inlaid with twelve precious stones: the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.

²¹ The twelve gates were made of pearls—each gate from a single pearl! And the main street was pure gold, as clear as glass.

²² I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. ²⁴ The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. ²⁵ Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. ²⁶ And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. ²⁷ Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

22 Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ² It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

³ No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. ⁴ And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. ⁵ And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.⁴

Reflect and Respond

¹ See Mark. 13:24; Luke. 21:25; Revelation. 6:12, 17; 9:2

² Adapted from D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Joel 2:28.

³ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: The New Bible Commentary. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Joe 3:18.

⁴ Tyndale House Publishers, *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*, "Text Edition"--Spine., 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), Re 21:1-22:5.