

War and Peace
Joel 3:9-17
By Randy Wages
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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

- I. Introduction: “War and Peace” – that’s the title of a classic written by the Russian, Leo Tolstoy. I recall from high school days seeing that title on an optional reading list from which we were required to make selections to read. And being a typical teenager, I steered clear of this one because this book is as much renowned for its length as it is for being a classic piece of literature. Well I’ve chosen that title, “War and Peace,” as the title for today’s sermon. But don’t worry, that decision has nothing to do with the length of my message. And while I may have steered clear of exploring the lengthy novel with that title, you cannot afford to steer clear of the subject matter we will explore this morning. I hope to confront you with the certainty of a verdict that will be issued for each of us at the final judgment, a verdict of eternal consequence. Will God’s verdict concerning me (concerning you) be one that finds you remaining in the condition in which we all start this life on earth – enemies, at war with God? Or will God’s verdict be one that declares that a peace has been made for you between you and your Creator – an everlasting peace? War and Peace!

We are going to consider a prophetic passage found in Joel, chapter 3, verses 9-17, which describe the final judgment we all will face. Joel 3 is a prophecy of the final conflict at the 2nd coming of Christ – that which many refer to as the Battle of Armageddon. But contrary to popular belief, this prophesy is not of a physical battle to be waged, but rather a spiritual battle. You can study that more on your own from Revelation 16. This is a battle that has already been won. It was won at the cross. Before we turn to Joel, I want you to see that in John 12. As the hour of Christ’s crucifixion neared, He said this in verse 31, “**Now <on the cross> *is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world <Satan> be cast out***” And then as we read in Hebrews 2:14: “***Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he <Christ> also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;***” That phrase “destroy him” means to render him powerless. So while it’s clear that God allows Satan’s influence to continue in our day, the fact is, he has no condemning power whatsoever over those who have been reconciled to God (for whom an everlasting peace was made) by Christ’s redeeming work for them on the cross. They have life and that eternal! That battle was won at the cross.

So with that, let’s look at our text beginning in verse 9 of Joel 3 where God, speaking of the future day of judgment, says through His prophet...

II. Verses 9-12: *⁹Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: ¹⁰Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong. ¹¹Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen, and gather yourselves together round about: thither cause thy mighty ones to come down, O LORD. ¹²Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about.* Let me comment on these first 4 verses before proceeding further.

- A. Some believe this challenge made by God “to prepare war” is made to God’s allies rather than His enemies. And a case can be made for that; however, in my study I became persuaded (as many others are) that this is spoken ironically to the enemies of God. We will see in a moment how a different charge is given to the allies of God, the hosts of angels at His disposal. I believe God is speaking through the prophet in defiance saying, “Bring the best you’ve got and let’s see if it will stand before me, the almighty God of this universe.”
- B. And so he tells them to beat their plows into swords and their pruninghooks (which were scythes, like what we used to call swing blades) – beat them into spears. Take these peaceful, agricultural implements and turn them into weapons. In essence “bring it on.” When God says “let the weak say, I am strong” I think He means just that. You’re weak, but you think you’re strong. So, let’s see if you’ll stand and persevere in your strength.
- C. I chose this passage because of my curiosity and interest in verse 10 and how it compares with the other 2 passages in which plowshares and swords and pruninghooks and spears are mentioned. Here in Joel, we see that God’s charge is to beat the farming tools into weapons, while in the other 2 scriptural passages it speaks of just the opposite – of beating the weapons into farming tools. And from my study of that came the idea for this message on “War and Peace.” We will look at those other passages in a few minutes.
- D. But for now, consider how Joel 3 is a reminder of how devastating this certain, final judgment will be for the enemies of God. And listen: According to God’s word, we all start out in that camp – allied with Satan and enemies of God. That’s why God calls on all men everywhere to repent – to have a total reversal in heart and mind concerning Him and how such enemies are made His allies, accepted into His camp. Now notice how God’s command is issued to the men of war alongside the command to beat peaceful tools into weapons. This shows the differences found among these enemies of God – those who shall face the final judgment without the repentance of God-given faith – those still at war with God when they die and when Christ returns and when the verdict has been sealed.
1. Among God’s enemies, you have some soldiers, mighty men of war who are summoned to this battle. And that reminds me of those who are religious, engaged in the battle so to speak, some who even invoke the name of Christ (all the while presuming to have made their own peace with God – presuming to be on His side and at peace with God based upon their having done something, their act or profession of faith, their so-called free-will decision for Jesus, or whatever their particular religion prescribes – something other than (or in addition to) that which Christ alone accomplished for the salvation of His people).

2. So you have religious warriors and then you have others that aren't very religious who could be likened to the farmer, busy about their various occupations just as farming was the predominant occupation in those days. They were busy but not yet really engaged in the spiritual battle, not seriously delving into the things of God and eternity. This might describe those who are indifferent, or others who are somewhat religious, but if and when confronted with the good news we preach here, God's gospel of sovereign grace, whereby they are shown from God's word how all of salvation's conditions were fully met by Christ in His obedience unto death – when so confronted they choose just to 'agree to disagree' or they shrug it off as just too complicated, or just not worth the effort to sort through it all – those who won't engage in the battle perhaps just too preoccupied with their farming – their occupation, taking care of their families, etc.

But listen – this should not be to the neglect of your eternal welfare. This is serious business and here at this certain judgment, when it's too late for them, God defiantly commands them, prepare for the battle now – the battle you perhaps chose to avoid before. Come you religious warriors but also you who have not yet been engaged. You too now bring the best you have to plead as well. You are going to face this judgment and then you're going to be engaged – you're going to plead something. He is speaking to those who have departed this life and sealed their fate as His enemy. And whatever it is that enabled them to presume to come out okay regarding their eternal future, regarding how they will be judged before God, He in essence is telling them, "Present it now. Pick up your weapon. You cannot avoid this engagement."

E. And in the first part of verse 11, God commands the heathen to gather around. And I agree with many that the latter part of verse 11 is like a side comment. Whereas God was speaking through the Prophet, now Joel himself interjects, saying, "Lord, you bring your mighty ones down" most likely in reference to the host of angels at His beck and call. That would be in keeping with 2 Thessalonians, chapter 1, where Paul wrote of the time when the Lord would be "*...revealed from heaven with His mighty angels...*" to take vengeance on those who obeyed not the Gospel of Christ and to punish them with everlasting destruction.

F. And what started as a challenge in verse 9 actually becomes an irresistible summons as the heathen are awakened at the time of Christ's return, as they are raised from the grave to face this judgment, to come to the "valley of Jehoshaphat." Jehoshaphat was the name of a godly king, but the spiritual significance is found in what that name literally means. It means "the judgment of the Lord." We will see this more in the following verses which refer to this same "valley of Jehoshaphat" as the "valley of decision" or threshing. One person I read referred to it as "Verdict Valley" which I thought appropriate. There will be no decision made there, but rather a verdict declaring what our state was before God when we departed this physical life or when Christ returns – either still at war or at peace with God in Christ.

And the scripture depicts this as if God were sitting like a judge in a courtroom, with a warrant having been issued for all to appear. None will escape this judgment where God will pronounce either, “Guilty – depart from me” or else “Innocent” – innocent in Christ, accepted in Him, the believer’s Savior, mediator, and advocate (their lawyer) before the Father, who will plead His own precious blood and righteousness on their behalf. And then as we reach verse 13, we now see the charge made to the army of God as it reads...

III. Verses 13-17: ¹³*Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down; for the press is full, the vats overflow; for their wickedness is great.* 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 shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining.* ¹⁶*The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.* ¹⁷*So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more.*

A. Verse 13: With Joel 3:13 in mind, look with me at Matthew 13. There Christ had just related the parable of the wheat and tares, a tare being a weed that looks like wheat and grows with the wheat but really isn’t wheat. And the disciples asked the Lord to explain the parable so beginning in verse 37... *“He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man <referring to Himself, Christ>; ³⁸The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; ³⁹The enemy that sowed them <the tares> is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.”* So back in Joel 3:13 it would appear this charge is directed to God’s angels. This is the time of harvest and the charge is made to the reapers, the angels that will pour out what the book of Revelation calls the vials of God’s wrath.

Often the wine press is used in scripture as a symbol of God’s wrath just as it is here. Before the holiness of God, it is said of both (1) the religious who trust in their own might as well as (2) the indifferent irreligious, that they shall all be crushed as grapes in the winepress of God’s holy wrath. Why? Is it because God is unreasonably dissatisfied with them? No – because as it reads, their wickedness is great. Man’s problem is complicated by the fact that in our natural state, at enmity with God, (apart from the new birth and God’s grace to believe His gospel), that multitudes will face this judgment unaware of their wickedness, of how truly wicked they are – not convinced of their total depravity before the holiness of God and of their desperate need for a righteousness, a perfection before God which they cannot produce – the need for the perfect righteousness of the Savior to be put to their account, their need to be made one with Christ, accepted in Him, having His very righteousness made to be theirs.

B. Verse 14: And then in verse 14 we're told that multitudes will be summoned to this valley of Jehoshaphat, this "valley of decision" or threshing. "Multitudes, multitudes" – (1) multitudes of the enemies who died while remaining at war with God (although many will not have recognized it during their lifetime on earth) and (2) multitudes of the saved for whom peace has been made and who, during their respective lifetimes, were providentially brought to hear and embrace this preached Gospel of peace where they learned of how an everlasting peace has been made for them by the doing and dying of Christ, the Prince of peace. And so all will face this final judgment as denoted by this gathering in the valley of Jehoshaphat (which means the judgment of the Lord) or what is also called the "valley of decision." Your Bible may have the same reference as mine showing the word "decision" there actually means concision (as in cutting) or threshing. The picture is that of the threshing floor where the wheat and tares are separated, where the enemies of God will be cut down as they face the sickle of God's wrath.

God, being holy and just, must pour out His wrath upon all sin. And those who remain at enmity (enemies) at the judgment will experience His wrath as they are sentenced to an everlasting separation from God and the torment of hell. But did you know that God's wrath is also poured out on the sins of those for whom peace was made? That's how peace was made for them. God's wrath was poured out on their Substitute and Surety who willingly took on the guilt of all their sins and died on the cross to provide for them an everlasting righteousness (a perfect satisfaction to His law and justice) which God has graciously imputed or charged to their accounts.

C. Verse 15: We see that verse 15 speaks of the sun and the moon being darkened and the stars not shining. This may literally take place as God's wrath is poured out then just as it took place when His wrath was poured out on Christ at His crucifixion. Remember how there were 3 hours of darkness? For sure we know it will be a dark day for all those who fall under His just wrath, when they shall be cast into outer darkness and cut off from all comfort and joy.

D. Verse 16: And verse 16 speaks of how the Lord shall roar out of Zion, Zion representing His church, the dwelling place of God. The scripture refers to Christ as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Here He is depicted as the all-powerful whose roar and voice shall be heard from Jerusalem, referring to the heavenly city of Jerusalem, not the physical city of Israel. Can you imagine how devastating and frightening that roar will be to the multitudes who shall perish? But notice at the end of the verse, this same all-powerful lion will be manifested as the strength and the hope of His people, spiritual Israel (those chosen for eternal deliverance in Christ, typified by the chosen nation of Israel under the Old Mosaic covenant). The word "hope" there designates a place of repair as in those whose sin problem has been fixed, taken care of. It denotes a safe harbor for them from God's wrath. And it is their hope – all their desire because His people are those who (under the sound of this, His gospel of grace) were convinced of their wickedness and brought to see the necessity of being made one with the sinless Christ so as to be found in Him, having His perfect righteousness as their own.

And notice that Christ is their strength in contrast to the weak mentioned back in verse 10 when God says in defiance, “You who are truly weak, go ahead and say you’re strong, so let’s see how that which you can do will measure up.” Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12, “*...when I am weak, then am I strong.*” God’s people see their own weakness as they brought to see all their strength in Christ.

E. Verse 17: And then in verse 17 God declares they shall know Him dwelling in Zion, His church, which He calls His holy mountain. Then He says Jerusalem (referring to all true believers everywhere and from every age) – Jerusalem will be holy! Wow – sinners, accounted holy, having the holiness (the righteousness) of Christ imputed to them. As viewed in their Substitute and Representative, they are and have always been holy in Him. Paul told the believers at Colosse beginning in Colossians 1:20, “***And, <Christ> having made peace through the blood of his cross <the cross of Christ, that’s how peace was made for those whose hope is in Him>, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. ²¹And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled ²²In the body of his flesh through death, to present you <you otherwise wicked sinners> holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight:***” You former enemies, have His perfection put to your account!

And then at the end of verse 17 we see the finality of it all as He adds that “*...there shall no strangers pass through her any more.*” It’s over and only those found holy in Christ shall remain. The tares will be identified, cut down, and separated from the wheat. In God’s true church there will be no more false doctrine and confusion within its professing ranks. They will all be of one mind in Christ, their hope and strength.

IV. The Urgency:

A. I hope this message on this subject will awaken men and women in this lifetime of the urgency to come to grips with how they, as sinners, must be found holy to be included in this eternally blessed camp, this holy, heavenly Jerusalem. When the time of Joel 3 arrives it will be too late. In Hebrews 9, beginning in verse 27, we read, “***And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: ²⁸So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him <those whose hope is in Him and His offering for their sins> shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.***” Christ’s glorious return will be without sin. He bore the sins of His people, the Israel of God, at the cross. And the perfect satisfaction of His precious blood offering put them away. He bore the full wrath that was justly due unto those sins and God will remember them no more! Flee to this Christ as your hope for salvation and forsake the distractions of this world and the natural religion of man that will have us trying to make our own peace with God, attempting to do that which only His precious blood could (& did) accomplish for all who are saved.

- B. Consider this picture. Here in Joel 3, we have among the enemies the mighty men of war which as I've suggested can be likened to lost religionists. And it will be tragic for those who sincerely imagine they are at peace with God only to hear the words such as those spoken by Christ in Matthew 7, beginning in verse 22 where He said, "**Many will say to me in that day, <the day of judgment> Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? <Preachers> and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?**" ²³**And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.**" The practice of their religion, what they thought was good, God calls iniquity, sin – that which is inequitable with what He requires, which does not measure up to the perfect righteousness needed to be found acceptable before a holy God.
- C. And then we've also seen there will be the irreligious who will be drafted into this spiritual battle at the judgment, who can't put it off any longer but who must bring whatever it is that caused them to perhaps just not give it much thought or to not seriously delve into spiritual matters. Their weapon of choice may be their calculation that if "so and so," who so many presume will go to heaven, is okay then I'll get in as well, knowing that they're just as good deep down, maybe even better. But the outwardly righteous among men is not the standard! These preachers of Matthew 7 brought their best but it won't measure up either. Read Matthew 5 where Christ declared that except your righteousness exceeds the best of the best (as measured outwardly among men) you shall not enter the kingdom of God. At the end of that chapter He tells us how far it must exceed their righteousness when He commands, "**Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.**" (Matt. 5:48). You must be found just as righteous, just as perfect in obeying all of the revealed will of God (not only in deed, but in thought and in purity of motive) – just as perfect as the impeccable Son of God was when He walked on this earth in perfect, sinless obedience to God the Father. Acts 17:31 declares that His righteousness will be the standard by which we all shall be judged. You can't produce that righteousness. You must have righteousness (the merit of His doing and dying) graciously put to your account! If you truly see that, you'll become one the mercy beggars for whom God has been gracious and shown mercy in Christ.

V. Comparison with Isaiah 2 and Micah 4:

- A. So, let's review a bit. First, remember that we all start out in Satan's camp, allied with Him and enemies with God. Ephesians 1 and elsewhere clearly teaches that we all are born as spiritually dead sinners. So we begin here on earth void of a "spiritual mind" as Paul calls it in Romans 8, the mind of those who truly have spiritual life and the spiritual faculties to discern the things of God. Instead we begin with what Paul calls a "carnal mind" and he says of that natural state in verse 7, that the carnal mind "**...is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.**" We start out as enemies, not subject to the strictness and standard of perfection required by God's law. And we can't even see our need for that because we're spiritually dead, void of spiritual sight. As Christ told Nicodemus we must be born again – born of the Spirit, given the spiritual and eternal life which Christ purchased for all His people on Calvary's cross.

- B. Now the enemies cited in Joel 3, whether religious or indifferent, are those who remain in this state of spiritual blindness until the final judgment, until it is too late. And God commands them in defiance at that time to beat their tools into weapons, to bring their best even though it won't prevail. Well I mentioned that plowshares, swords, pruninghooks, and spears are mentioned 2 other times in scripture. And the context in which these references are found is very important. We've established the context of Joel 3 as the day of the final judgment. But in both the other 2 instances, the context is what is called "the last days," meaning the gospel or church age, the time between the 1st coming of Christ and His second coming. This is the time in which we live, in which the Gospel has now gone out to all the world – the Gospel which God uses to call His sheep, spiritual Israel. During this age the gospel is no longer confined to the chosen nation Israel under the Old Mosaic Covenant, the temporal covenant which Christ abolished by fulfilling all that was pictured and prophesied therein.
- C. First in Isaiah 2:4 we read, "**And he** <the Lord> **shall judge among the nations**, <by the preached gospel going out to the Gentiles, to the entire world in these last days> **and shall rebuke** <or convince, call to repentance> **many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.**" Sinners will lay down their weapons by which they opposed God and no longer take sides with Satan. They will surrender to the truth of the Gospel of God's grace, seeing their need for the peace that only Christ could and did establish at Calvary and they enter into that peace. How can they know He died for them? Because Christ said He gave His life for the sheep and they hear Him and follow Him. Their hope is placed solely in Him and we won't do that and we can't do that unless and until we are given the blood-bought gift of faith. As Romans 10:4 teaches, "...**Christ is the end** <the completion or fulfillment, the finishing> **of the law for righteousness** <the righteousness we all need> **to everyone that believeth.**" Is He your fulfillment of the law, of all that God requires, the righteousness you must have? He is for every true believer!
- D. An almost identical prophecy to Isaiah 2 is found in Micah 4:3 where we read, "**And he** <the Lord> **shall judge among many people**, <again by the preached gospel going out to the Gentiles, to the entire world in these last days> **and rebuke** <or convince, call to repentance> **strong nations afar off;** <the gospel having been brought near to those who, like all of us by nature, trusted in their own strength but who are now convinced of the futility of that> **and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.**" They will see how peace was made for them in Christ, how their enemy, sin and Satan was rendered powerless by His cross work for them. God will convince His people of this through the preached gospel. And with God-given faith they quit trusting in their own strength and place all their trust for salvation in Him. And at the judgment that will be their only plea. As we read in Joel 3, Christ shall be their hope and strength.

VI. Closing: So to recap, we've seen that all begin life's journey as enemies against God. But at some stage, either now or at the judgment, we all engage in this battle against Him. If you're religious at all, consider how your first religious thoughts involve warring with God in opposition to His way of salvation. When we first seriously consider our eternal destiny, our initial thoughts go something like this, "I want to be saved. What do I need to do in order to be saved?" Isn't that a natural question? But do you see embodied in that question is the deadly assumption that you can do something to be saved. And that is diametrically opposed to God's way of salvation as set forth in His glorious Gospel of salvation by grace in Christ.

God's gospel teaches us from Romans 3:20 that "*...by the deeds of the law* <by our doing> *there shall no flesh be justified in his sight*: <that means by our doing, none will be declared just, not guilty> *for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*" Those truly convinced by God the Holy Spirit of sin come to see God's strict requirement for holiness – of the need for a perfect righteousness they as sinners are helpless to produce. But they only see that as they hear of and submit to the perfect righteousness which Christ alone established by His doing and dying. That's the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel that is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe it. He perfectly obeyed the Father as He walked on this earth without sin. And He perfectly satisfied the justice of God for all those sinners He represented by His substitutionary death on the cross where, through the shedding of His precious blood, He paid in full the just penalty due unto all their sins – all for whom He lived and died.

So we all start out as enemies. Sadly, multitudes will face the judgment still at enmity with God. But what about the others among the multitudes in that day of judgment, gathered in 'Verdict Valley' so to speak? They are described as those who found their hope and strength in Christ and His righteousness alone. They are holy in Him. You could say they visited the blacksmith before it was too late. They had already beaten their swords into plows in this lifetime rather than tragically hearing the irresistible command to do just the opposite as they face the judgment. These eternally blessed of God have laid down their weapons, seeing they had no strength to make peace, but seeing the perfect peace, the eternal reconciliation made for them by their Substitute and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a judgment to face. Whatever you believe will make the difference in your receiving a favorable verdict identifies your hope – where you've placed your trust. Is it in your own strength – because you made a decision or choice that others wouldn't? Is it because you presume to have somehow "made your peace" with God – perhaps because you, unlike others decided to "accept Jesus as your personal Savior" as so many like to put it? Or is it because you figure you measure up pretty good in comparison to other sinners? Or will you be found among those who truly trust in the Lord, resting solely in that which He accomplished for you – the righteousness and peace that He established for you by His perfect obedience unto death as your Surety and Substitute?

Will you be found at the judgment at war with God, beating plows into swords? Or will you be among those who find their hope, strength and peace in Christ alone, having already beaten their swords into plows before it's too late? At the judgment there will be 2 groups: One still at war with God, the other with a perfect, everlasting peace. War and Peace – In which group will you be found?

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.

Randy Wages