

Introduction

A few weeks back, Melissa and I were traveling through Tennessee on our way down to see our parents. We were going to spend the night along the way in a BNB just outside Pigeon Forge. I had put the address into the navigation and was just going where it told me. The next thing we knew we were descending a mountain on a steep narrow road, barely wide enough for the car, a mountain wall on one side and a drop-off on the other. We then had to cross a stream. When we finally got to the bottom, we found ourselves in a beautiful valley where we were to stay in a farmhouse for a refreshing night. This morning in Joel 3 God brings the nations down into a valley, but it is not for a refreshing overnigher. The passage is not so much about how they get there but what happens when they do.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

The prophecy of Joel opens by drawing attention to an unprecedented invasion of locusts that utterly devastated the land. Every layer of society was impacted by the loss. God has brought about this day to get their attention. Joel calls the people to gather in a solemn assembly before the Lord and turn from their sin.

Joel then calls for a trumpet to be blown to sound the alarm. God has raised up an army to come against Zion. The devastation of the army will surpass that of the locusts. But let everyone leave what they are doing and come and gather in repentance before the Lord. That is what they did, and the Lord relented and destroyed the threatening army. He gave the people of Zion further reason to rejoice and be glad. He would restore the years that the locusts had eaten and be in their midst. Then the Lord promised a future blessing. He would pour out his Spirit on all his people. They would boldly declare the wondrous works of God. While these would be dark days, everyone who would call upon the name of the Lord would be saved.

But this glorious age of holding out gospel hope would come to a conclusion. The Day of the Lord will arrive in fullness. All of the shaking and warnings of a future day of the Lord will cease and that day will arrive. Chapter three declares to us the substance of the final and full day of the Lord. We can sum it up simply—restoration of His people and judgment of the nations. These themes are the substance of Joel 3.

As we focus first on verses 1-8, the thing that jumps out is that God's restoration of his people is inseparable from his judgment of the nations. The restoration of God's people demands the punishment and removal of their enemies who are also in fact enemies of God. The day of the Lord is when he brings to pass the blessings and curses which he has spoken.

The Lord has spoken indeed. Notice the closing words of verse 8: "for the Lord has spoken." The prophet gives us the words of God. These words reflect his settled intention. They take us back to Genesis 1. And God said, and there was. What God spoke came to be. And the

force here in Joel is that what God has spoken shall certainly and surely come to pass. And also the fact that the Lord is the one who is speaking makes it clear that the Lord is not merely predicting what will happen; he is declaring what he himself will do. He is personally involved and active in restoring his people and in judging their enemies. No less than 7 times the Lord uses the word "I" to declare what he is going to do, action he is going to take. The Lord has spoken and he will certainly do it. To grasp the message of the text, let's look at what it is that the Lord will do.

I. The Lord Will Restore His People.

A. In verse 1 the Lord indicates that he will "restore the fortunes of his people." We get a good idea of what he means down in verse 7 where he says he will stir up the people of Judah and Jerusalem from the place to which they had been sold. The restoration of their fortune refers to their return. They will come back home. They will be restored in their fortune because they will be brought home to the place God has chosen.

B. What the Lord speaks here through Joel he had spoken through Moses back in Deuteronomy 30. The Israelites were warned to be faithful and obey the Lord and all he commanded them. And they were told that if they obeyed they would be blessed, and if they disobeyed there would be curses and the Lord would drive them out of the land of promise and disperse them among all the nations. But if they would return and obey the voice of the Lord from their hearts, he would "restore their fortunes," have mercy on them and gather them from the peoples where they had been scattered and bring them back home and make them to prosper. In fact here is what the Lord said to the people as he continued, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. And he will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord and keep all his commandments" (Dt 30:6-8).

When God restores his people, the mark of that restoration is that the people are brought back to the Lord. They are brought to a place of loving him with their whole heart and to a place of joyful obedience. This is life: to love God and obey him. That is what heaven will be.

C. One of the things that is wrong the world today is it thinks that it is life to pursue our every fleshly desire. It thinks it is hate to tell people they can't have whatever their flesh hungers for. It believes happiness and fulfillment is having your fleshly desires gratified. But God teaches us through his word, the Bible, that life and joy and satisfaction and enrichment are only found in loving God and obeying him. When you love God and obey him, he is pleased to prosper you abundantly. Deuteronomy 30:9 says that when you love the Lord and obey him from the heart, he DELIGHTS in prospering you. Psalm 37:4 says basically the same thing. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." If you delight yourself in the Lord, then your desire will be to obey him and love him and enjoy him and he will give that to you. No good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84:11).

This is the restoration of the people of the Lord at the last day. Now we are sojourners in a foreign land. But he will bring us back home. He will restore our fortunes. He will bring us from far away to bask in his presence to love him and obey him gloriously.

You hear the voice of the devil every single day. It whispers out in your mind, in your thoughts, in your fleshly yearnings. He tells you that you can't be happy or fulfilled or enriched without ungodly indulgence. He is a liar and he wants to direct you far from God, far from home, far from hope. Do not listen! Listen to the promises of God. He will restore his people to joy unspeakable and full of glory, but we must love him and obey him.

So that is the first thing the Lord says that he will do. He will restore his people. He will bring them home. Now let's turn to the other action the Lord says he will take in the great day of the Lord.

II. The Lord Will Judge His People's Enemies.

So we noted that it is 7 times that the Lord declares what he will do in the day of the Lord. Two instances have to do with his people. The other five have to do with the enemies of his people. Here they are: I WILL . . .

1. Gather all the nations to the valley of Jehoshaphat
2. Enter into judgment with them there
3. & 4. Return their payment on their own head (2 x)
5. Sell their sons and daughters to the Jews

What I want you to grasp in these declarations is the absolute resolve of God. He will bring the nations who have behaved with disdain towards his people into judgment and under the consequences of their evil.

A. When he pledges to bring the nations to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, the Lord is not emphasizing a particular place but an event. The name Jehoshaphat means "Yahweh has judged." A valley is a place well-suited to the gathering of multitudes. It where they are brought low. The Lord in fact says "I will bring them down to the valley." Those who have thought highly of themselves the Lord will cast down from their high places to the valley. The Hebrew word means to topple, to prostrate, or to humiliate. And that is what he is going to do with the wicked on the last day.

B. Bringing the nations into the valley, the Lord declares that he will enter into judgment with them. He will present the case against them and will render the sentence upon them. And the case against them consists in part of what they have done to the people of God. The Lord represents his people Israel as he brings the charges. The Lord says, "I come on behalf of my people and my heritage."

The nations have persecuted God's people. They came into the land and scattered them out by selling them into slavery. God's people became goods for whom the enemies cast lots and sold for an encounter with a prostitute or a container of wine. This is how great was the

disdain for God's people. They despised and mistreated and humiliated them. And these are people the Lord calls, "my people." He takes it personally. He takes it seriously. He will exact rightful vengeance.

C. The third and fourth "I will" statements of God directed at the enemies of God are the same. "I will return your payment on your own head."

Here is an interesting statement. God is pointing out that he will retributively return upon them justice for their wickedness. He asks them what he has done to provoke their treating him this way. They have taken HIS silver and gold, ravaged the goods of his land and taken them to worship their gods and sold his people to far away places. They wanted to remove them far away. The Jews make the nations uncomfortable and they just want them out of there. Just get rid of these silly Jews and their God!

This is the way the sinful world looks upon the faithful who serve the Lord. It is the way Saul of Tarsus looked upon the early church. He stood by as Stephen was stoned. He breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He told Agrippa he was "convinced that [he] ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth." He explained, "And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even into foreign cities" (Acts 26:9-11).

Jesus explained it. He said, "the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." Guilt and hate for right is what moved Cain to kill Abel. And it is what moved the Pharisees and Sadducees to murder Jesus. And it is what moves rioters to burn Bibles and long for the elimination of Christians.

Jesus was clear to his disciples that the world would treat his followers with the same contempt with which it treated him. Looking through the prophecy of Joel to the final day of the Lord, we see that the Lord takes great offense to the way the world mistreats his servants. To persecute the people of God is to persecute God himself. To have a complaint with his people is to have a complaint with him. To mistreat them is to pay back God as though he had committed some injustice against them. But he will turn that payment back on them. Twice he says so. The world better believe he means it. When governors and mayors and courts team up against the church of Christ, they team up against God himself, and he will return their hostility upon them.

The lesson for Christ's followers is not that we have the place to judge and breathe out murder. It is God who does the judging. But we should be assured that our suffering at the hands of the world for doing what is right, for obeying Christ, is not unnoticed by our Lord. For us to suffer for the gospel and righteousness is for him to suffer. We are filling up the

sufferings of Christ. Remember the question Jesus put to Saul on the road to Damascus. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

Here is a warning to the world not to persecute Christ's church, and an assurance for the church to the degree that we must be persecuted for Christ. When persecution happens, it is not a strange thing. What is strange are the conditions we have known in this country for 200 plus years. Now, when it all seems to be coming down, prepare, commit your way to the Lord, and draw near to him.

D. The final "I" in the text is this: "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." Two things. 1. God will inflict punishment through his people. 2. God will bring on his enemies punishment of the kind that they inflicted on his people. They sought to displace God's people far from Zion. Now he will insure that THEY are placed far from Zion.

In bringing his people near, he will send his enemies far away. This was the warning against the enemies of the Lord and the message of hope and encouragement to the people of the Lord. He would bring his own home to be with him while casting his enemies far away. Jesus came preaching the same message. He taught those not belonging to him will be thrown into the OUTER darkness while His people will enjoy a great wedding feast.

Conclusion

There is a prevailing message in this prophecy for the world. There is nothing more dangerous in all the world than to be an enemy to the people of God. And I do not have to tell you that enemies are assembling today in massive numbers, vocally despising the word of God and the people of God. Christians are accused of using religion as a cover for bigotry because we stand on divinely given moral principles. We are being called phobic and haters. The intent of those who lift their voices is to silence us, change our minds, or send us away. The spirit of Cain is alive and intensifying in our culture and society. It is as David describes the scene in Psalm 37. "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him." "The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose way is upright."

But the message of Joel is that God will allow this hostility to go on only for so long and then he will bring it to a stop and he will bring down payment on the heads of the nations when he restores his people.

Psalm 37 articulates the Lord's response to the wicked. "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming. The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy to slay those whose way is upright; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken." "The wicked will perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away. ... those cursed will be cut off."

You do not want to be an enemy of the Lord! But the only way to escape that enmity is to turn to him and to be reconciled to him. That's what Saul did. He was a persecutor of the church, but he found mercy and repented and trusted in Christ Jesus to have not a righteousness of his own doing but the righteousness of God that comes as a gift to those who will love, believe, and trust in Christ. You may be far from God this morning, but you can draw near through the blood of Jesus. He died on the cross and suffered in the place of sinners to restore us to himself. But we must turn from sin and trust him.

There is also a prevailing message in this prophecy for those who follow Christ. There are few things more encouraging for believers in this world than the fact that restoration is coming. It is on the horizon. Every day brings it closer. In that time we will join the Lord in his very presence with hearts to love him and obey him as we never have before. But that time is not yet. It will not come until Christ returns to gather the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat.

Until then, God's enemies will continue to ravage his people. But we can be sustained as we keep an eternal perspective. It makes all the difference. Our weeping will be just for the night but joy comes in the morning. Here again I point you to Psalm 37. It addresses God's people: "Fret not yourself because of evil doers; be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust also in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! ...for the evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait for the lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

"The Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. They are preserved forever."

"The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him."

The message for the people of the Lord is to hold on; trust him; take refuge in the Lord and do good. He may not keep you from the threats of the evil, but he will give you ultimate deliverance. The wicked may threaten. They may bend their bow; but their end is certain and soon. The devil may be laughing for the moment, but his laugh is almost up. And even if you die, your eternal future will never dim in its brightness of hope and peace. Brothers and sisters, keep your eyes and your hearts set on heaven to make it confidently through this time while we are away.