

Introduction

True or False? Most people do not want to think about final judgment. My sense is that statement is most definitely true. Most people do not want to ponder the prospect of standing before God to answer to him and face his verdict against them. Folks who do not follow Christ hope it will not happen. So why bother thinking about something I hope will not take place? And for that matter, it might make me feel guilty for some of the things I do, and we cannot have that can we? Christ followers ourselves do not really want to think about the day of judgment either. It is a frightening and uncomfortable prospect. And it seems so very far away.

But clearly God DOES WANT us to think about final judgment. The pages of Scripture are filled with depictions and warnings of that final day. And reckoning with the reality of that final day can make a huge difference for us. How we respond to the fact of that final day of reckoning will even make a difference in where we spend eternity. How ever uncomfortable it may be, we must not shirk taking the time to study what God's word says about final judgment. We can't afford it. The stakes are too high. As we come to the third chapter of Joel this morning, we are going to stop and dig in and look carefully at what the Lord declares about his final judgment, the handing down of his decision regarding sinful humanity.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

In the first 8 verses of Joel 3, the prophet declares the intention of the Lord to restore his people and judge their enemies and his. Now verses 9-21 depict a call to execute what he prophesied in the earlier section. And the result is to provide an amplified understanding of God's judgment on the one hand and his restoration on the other. What happens in judgment happens in the valley and what happens in terms of restoration occurs in the mountains. Joel's message here is of judgment in the valley and restoration in the mountains. But time will only allow us to focus on the judgment in the valley this morning. Next time we will come back to the restoration in the mountains.

Part I. Judgment in the Valley.

The Lord had indicated he was gathering the nations and bringing them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, the valley of the judgment of God. This message is of final judgment. In these subsequent verses in which the Lord calls out for the judgment to commence, we see four aspects of God's final judgment of the nations.

I. War.

First, it is war. The Lord's judgment against the nations means war. Two opposing parties will be gathered to square off against each other and eternity hangs in the balance.

A. The Lord calls the nations to CONSECRATE, to set themselves apart, for war. That is a religious term. In ancient days, the nations prepared for battle by offering sacrifices to their gods and calling upon them to help them and aid them in battle. The nations are told to go to their gods to seek help for this day of battle against the Lord. The nations have worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator. The Lord allows the nations to get ready for this battle by drawing all the power they can from the gods they have served. It will be put on full display in that day that all the false gods created in the minds of human beings, all the things and imaginings they worshiped and served, will be as much help on that day as Baal was in the standoff with Elijah on Mount Carmel.

There is a subtle but certain warning here not to put your hope and trust in anyone or in anything other than the one true and Almighty God—not in yourself, not in false gods, not in the stuff of this world, not in human ingenuity, not in science, not in human philosophy, certainly not in teaching because it makes you feel good. If you do not put your hope and trust in God, you will have no shield strong enough to help when God calls you to battle. You will be as prepared for battle as was Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Your only hope is to not be caught fighting against him.

B. The Lord is summoning everyone to this battle. He is giving the enemy the benefit of mustering every single one of its warriors to fight against him. He calls all the men of war, the mighty and the weak. He tells them to beat their farming tools into weapons. He is offering every opportunity for his enemies to be at their strongest when they engage in combat against him and his warriors.

Judgment is God making war on his enemies. You see by sin, human beings make war on God. And in judgment God makes war on people who have made war against him. He simply returns on their own heads the offense due them for the combat and hostility of their hearts against him.

Let us think about this! We need to have a deep and sober understanding of sin. And we don't even come close if we do not see our sin against God as war with the creator of the universe, as a hateful assault against him designed to remove him from the universe's throne and replace him with us. These riots going on in the United States where people are basically protesting law and order, calling for the de-funding of the police, these depict the war cry of human hearts for the de-throning of God. When we sin, when we disobey God, we are saying to God, "Thy will NOT be done!" Not your will but mine! And the substance of that cry is a declaration of war.

If you underestimate the serious nature of your sin against God, you will underestimate the consequences of that sin. And on the day when God comes against you in justice for your crimes against him, you will be in shock and awe and there are no words to describe the depth of anguish that will grip your soul on that day. Rather let the anguish of the high-handed nature of your sin grip you today so that you might repent and turn to him before the great and awful day of the Lord! Sin is our war against God. Judgment is God's war against sinners.

II. Harvest.

There is a second aspect of God's judgment. It is a day of harvest. Down in verse 13, we hear the Lord calling out that his servants put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. The day of the Lord is a day represented by ripe grapes. They are full and the time for picking those grapes has come.

A. We picked cherries in Door County a couple weeks ago. The timing was just perfect. They were ripe and juicy and tasted so good. Titus was with us and he was putting cherries in his mouth two-at-a time and the juice was tricking down his chin. That is the state of these ripened grapes. They have been allowed to develop to full ripeness. They are full and plump and juicy and ready for the picking and ready for the winepress. There the vats overflow because the juice being exuded out of the ripened grapes is the profuse accumulation of evil. Every individual sin is war with God and those sins are many and their evil great. Multiply that by the multitudes who face this terrible judgment. "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision."

B. The decision here is not one to be made by the people; they have already made their decision not to love God and worship him. It is God's decision of judgment that will be rendered here in the valley. The grapes will be pressed and their blood will flow because of the abominable accumulation

of evil of which their lives consist. The scene is brought to our attention again in the New Testament. Listen to Revelation 14:17-20:

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel . . . called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle . . .

C. People, do not be deceived. God is holy and righteous. And he is a judge of evil. Wickedness may seem to be running out of control in these days as people call good evil and evil good. And the world takes no second thought of indulging in behavior that is reprehensible to God. But listen to Paul in Colossians 3: he lists . . . "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry," "anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk," and lying, and he declares "On account of these the wrath of God is coming."

In Romans Paul mentions evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, insolence, haughtiness, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient, fearless, ruthless . . . and he says we know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Then he uses language that depicts ripened juicy grapes about to burst. "Because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." (Romans 2:5)

Do not let God's patience deceive you to think that his judgment will not fall. He is waiting until the time of harvest is here, but then there will be no escaping the judgment of God.

D. Brothers and sisters, the reason any of us will avoid the wrath of God is because Christ Jesus was put into the winepress for us. He was pressed by the judgment of God on the cross. What was squeezed out in his suffering was not the evil of his sin, for he had none. But it was the evil of our sin. He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment for our evil that brought us peace; and by his wounds we are healed.

And having come to Christ, we must put off the behavior and heart that excites the wrath of God. God's wrath comes on people who walk in these sins because he hates them. They are antithetical to who he is. If we long for God, if we love God, if we thirst for God, then we believers must put off these things. You cannot be in fellowship with God and walk in these targets of God's holy and righteous wrath. Put them to death or be put to death for them.

III. Cosmic Darkness.

A. So, God's judgment is war; it is harvest; it is also a day of cosmic darkness. Joel speaks of the sun and moon being darkened and the stars withdrawing their shining. We have seen this before in Joel. The idea is that these fixtures which appear so firm and steady and unshakable are now convulsing, trembling, quaking. This is the consummate fearful and dreadful day of all time, and the foundations of creation itself cannot bear the sight, cannot bear the examination and prosecution and judgment of God against those who have trampled his creation and resisted his will. It is a fearful day!

B. Just think. Have you in the last 5 months – as we have been dealing with the unprecedented covid predicament and the conflicting viewpoints among scientists, doctors, health practitioners, and politicians, and preachers, and theologians, and even our own friends – as we have been dealing with unrest and multiple natural and man-made disasters going on – have you felt unrest? Have you felt tension? Have you become more prone to worry or at least felt unease or even a twinge of sorrow and darkness? Can you imagine the chaos and fear that would engulf the masses when the sun literally begins to darken? When the moon indeed dims? and the stars quit shining?

Well, the fear and dread of such a realization will be true of the day of God's wrath. Peter says (2 Peter 3:10-12) that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. . . .the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!"

God's faithfulness is new every morning, but in time to come his faithfulness is going to be revealed in that there will be no morning or night in this creation because it will have been destroyed. The heavenly bodies will dim and fail to shine and then what will pompous and confident sinners do? When Joel mentioned this scenery previously, he called upon people to repent, to gather in a solemn assembly to seek God's face and mercy, but no such call comes here because at that time it will be too late. Do not let the steadiness of creation up to this time cause you to fail to prepare for the day when the sun will no longer shine!

IV. The Roar of the Lord.

War, harvest, cosmic darkness. Each of those aspects happen in the valley. And now the fourth aspect of the judgment of God happens on the mountain. It is the roar of the Lord. Verse 16 says, "The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Zion and the heavens and the earth quake."

My brother-in-law, Melissa's older brother has a German shepherd named Harley. She is a beautiful dog, but I have always been more partial to dogs that were small enough I felt I would easily have the upper hand. Harley is a harmless sounding name and Harley is actually a pretty harmless dog, but she doesn't look that way and she certainly doesn't sound that way when she barks. A few weeks ago I was at Harley's house, and I jumped up from the chair to go to the kitchen. Harley let out a bark that made my blood curdle and I stopped in my tracks. Harley just wanted to play, but horror was my internal sensation if only for a moment.

In this word from the Lord, he is not playing. He is not issuing idle threats. He will have the last roar and it will be the roar of the lion in victory asserting his sovereign rule over the universe that he has created. It will be the roar of satisfaction that sinners are receiving the justice due them, that wrong is being righted. It will be an alarming cry even for the heavens and the earth, for they will quake with the horrifying and blood-curdling sound of the Lord himself when he roars.

For those unprepared, this day will be the first of unnumbered days of horror, angst, torment, regret, horror, pain, convulsion, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. Irreversible will be the decree. Eternal will be the smoke of the torment of these wicked. Multitudes, multitudes will suffer this ghastly but just outcome. And the Lord will roar.

Conclusion

We cannot afford to overlook these aspects of the judgment of God. It is good for us that we stand face-to-face with the Lord's description of that final day. I want to press upon us three specific lessons from this alarming description of the final judgment of God.

1. Do not let the distress of the present situation or the seeming flourishing of the wicked get you off track. (Repeat) This society has become more and more secularized and more and more unfriendly to the Lord and to his people. God in large part has booted out of the culture. He has taken the boot just about everywhere but the church, and some cases he has taken the boot there too. And on the world goes and the pressure these days is on Christians. They tells us we need to stop being hateful. We need to give up on our fantasies of God, heaven, and the authority of the Bible. We need to embrace the direction of culture because we are not going to be able to change it. We just need to adapt or shut-up. That's what I hear the culture saying to Christians. And it seems like all these evil people seem to have it so well. Baby murderers live high on the hog and the Democrat Party brazenly champions their cause. And then there is LGBTQ, and they seem to be winning their side of the culture battle with the media fully on board and the masses buying in. Having a moral compass is now defined as hate. It is deeply distressing. You may be tempted to just give up and join in.

Do not let the current state of affairs become a stumbling block for you. Asaph in Psalm 73 confesses that the flourishing of the evil almost made his feet slip. He was envious of the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. They seemed to be healthy and have little trouble in life. They were at ease and increasing in riches. But his life condition looked so different. He was faithfully trying to serve the Lord, but life for him was hard. And the thought came to him that it was "all in vain" that he had sought to obey the Lord. He almost caved until he went into the sanctuary of God and gave thought to His holiness and what is in store for the wicked at the end. He wrote: "Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!" He reasoned that sinners living in defiance to the Lord may seem healthy, wealthy, and happy today, but all of a sudden justice is going to fall, and they will face eternal destruction.

Oh, he then thought, how could I even have been tempted to think in that way? But Lord, he prayed, you didn't leave me even when I was thinking like that! You guide me with your counsel and afterward, you will receive me (not to the valley of decision, but) to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. You are my portion forever. Those far from you will perish, but for me it is good to be near God! The judgment of the wicked is critical to clear things up in our thinking. Christ's followers need to keep it in mind so we aren't deceived by the seeming prosperity of the wicked. It is just for a moment, and do not forget it.

2. If you have not fled to God for forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration, there is still time, and I urge you to come to terms of peace with God before the day of judgment in the valley of decision. Jesus Christ laid down his life. He was crushed on the cross so that every sinner who will call upon the name of the Lord for forgiveness through his blood might be spared the judgment we deserve.

3. Finally, fellow Christ followers, we need to go out into the harvest with the gospel before the angels go into the harvest with their sickles. The hour is urgent and the time is short and the stakes are high. Grapes are ripening and the day will be soon when the clusters will be cut and be thrown into the wine press. The horror of that day should be one of the factors that propels us out into the fields with the glorious gospel proclamation that Jesus Christ is the Great Savior of great sinners. We need to warn of the judgment of God and encourage sinners to repent and trust in him.

