

Joel Lesson 33

Joel 3:4, Continued

Joel 3:4 – “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.

Last week we almost finished looking at verse 4, but when we ended we were about to look at the final words in the phrase: “I will return your payment on your own head swiftly and speedily.”

What does it mean that the judgment would come **swiftly** and **speedily**?

Again, I think we are seeing a reference to Babylon here. Babylon famously besieged the city of Tyre for 13 years, and dominated all of Phoenicia. Edom started off as an ally, but Babylon later subjugated it. And as for Egypt, Babylon defeated them at the Battle of Carchemish and tossed them out of Palestine. And Babylon also conquered the cities of Philistia, destroying some of them.

And so, once again, I think we are seeing evidence of Babylon here with the word “speedily” and “swiftly” because that is just how it happened.

But let's stop and notice something important about these specific prophecies against these specific nations. I think they have dual fulfillments.

They have an immediate fulfillment in the near term when we look at what happened to these nations when Babylon showed up in the 6th century BC. But they also have a longer term fulfillment when we look at what the stone of Daniel 2 did to them in Acts 2 in the first century AD.

I think that judgment in Acts 2 looks backward in history and looks forward in history at what has happened or what will happen to any kingdom that is not the one eternal kingdom of Christ. No earthly kingdom is eternal. They will all fall. They will all crumble to dust before the eternal unshakable kingdom of Christ.

And, yes, we see that throughout history, and we will continue to see that, but I think it is the great judgment of Daniel 2 and Acts 2 that gives all of those past and future judgments their permanence and their finality. It was in Acts 2 with the proclamation of the gospel of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of Christ that all of the promises to Israel and Judah were fulfilled.

2 Corinthians 1:20 – For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

Acts 2 has rightly been called the hub of the Bible. We are sometimes accused of overstating the importance of Acts 2, but I don't think it is possible to do that! It was in that great chapter that the kingdom of Christ was established and the gospel of Christ was proclaimed beginning in Jerusalem. Absent Acts 2, there would be no church, no body of the saved, and absent Acts 2, Satan and the kingdoms of this world would be triumphant with no kingdom to challenge them and defeat them.

Joel 3:5-6

Joel 3:5-6 – For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their own border.

Yes, Philistia and Phoenicia had **said** things against Judah, but they had also **done** things against Judah – and we see two examples here. They had stolen silver and gold, and they had stolen people. The silver and gold had ended up in their own temples, and the people had ended up in Greece.

“Greeks! Greeks! We have Greeks! And therefore Joel must have been written in 300 BC!” It is truly amazing how often we see that ridiculous argument.

We saw it when we studied Daniel, and we often see it about the book of Joel as well.

And why is it ridiculous? Because by the time Alexander came along in 336 BC, Greece had already been a player on the world stage for over 400 years. The first Olympic Games were played in 776 BC, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by Homer in the late 8th or early 7th century BC.

In short, Greek culture had penetrated the Near East long before the Babylonian period, and so seeing a reference to the Greeks in Joel does not tell us much about when the book was written and most certainly does not rule out a date in the 6th century BC.

In fact, when we look at what is said about the Greeks here, we find evidence for an early date rather than a late date.

Joel writes: “You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them **far from their own border.**” If this had been written in the 4th century BC, then it could hardly be said that the Greeks were located **far** away! Joel’s statement makes sense only if the Greeks were located at the end of the world, just like they were in the 6th century (as we can see on the Handout for Lesson 32). Later in verse 8, God will threaten to sell the Philistines and

Phoenicians to the Sabeans, a people that is far away in the opposite direction (again as shown on the Handout for Lesson 32).

As for the specific charges in verses 5–6, we don't know of any historical incidents that match these descriptions – but, of course, that doesn't mean they didn't happen, but only that they weren't written down. I agree with the commentator who wrote: “Probably Joel simply alluded to incidents of plundering Jewish wealth that were known to him (and his listeners) but are unknown to us.”

And if we allow ourselves to go further back in history looking for an example, we can find one for the Philistines.

2 Chronicles 21:16–17 – And the LORD stirred up against Jehoram the anger of the **Philistines** and of the Arabians who are near the Ethiopians. And they came up against Judah and invaded it and carried away all the possessions they found that belonged to the king's house, and also his sons and his wives, so that no son was left to him except Jehoahaz, his youngest son.

And, in fact, that example shows us evidence for both of the charges listed in verses 5–6 – stealing treasures and stealing people.

And speaking of stealing people, the history of Greek slave trading also supports an early date

rather than a late date for the book of Joel. The economic expansion of Greece in the 7th century led to a heavy reliance on slave labor, and Greek trading colonies from the 6th century have been found in the Near East.

As we said, the Philistines and the Phoenicians were very bad neighbors. They rejoiced when tragedy struck Judah; they stole gold and silver from Judah; and they sold people from Judah into slavery far away.

And God knew all about it. But what would God do in response? Keep reading!

Joel 3:7-8

Joel 3:7-8 – 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. 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.”

What goes around comes around! Now the Jews were living in slavery far away, and their neighbors were living in their homes. But soon the tables would be turned – the Jews would be back home,

and their neighbors would be living in slavery far away (but in the opposite direction on the map).

And yes, there is word for what is happening here – and that word is **vengeance**. And there is nothing wrong with vengeance *per se*. The Bible tells us that vengeance can be a good thing. But the Bible also tells us that vengeance is not **our** thing.

Romans 12:19 – Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

We are not to take vengeance ourselves. Why not? Because when we do, we are putting ourselves in the place of God. Vengeance belongs to God, and that is what we are seeing here – God taking vengeance on the enemies of his people.

Was this punishment *literally* inflicted? Were Philistines and Phoenicians *literally* sold to the Sabeans?

I don't think we *must* answer yes to those questions. In fact, I think we are missing the point here if we try to check off each item in the judgments of Joel 3 on a list of historical events from the days of Joel.

Why do I say that? I say that because of our time frame. I say that because of our context. We spent a great deal of time on those issues when we

started Joel 3, and now is the time for us to use them!

The judgments in Joel 3 are first and foremost the judgments against the nations that happened in Acts 2 when the kingdom of Christ was established. That is what we saw when we looked at Daniel 2, Daniel 7, Psalm 2, Zephaniah 3, and Zechariah 12. And that is what we see when we look at the time frame of Joel 2 from Acts 2, and when we look at the time frame of Joel 3:1.

And what does that mean? What I think that means is that at least some aspects of this judgment are being described figuratively, as we saw in Daniel 2 when the stone struck the feet of that giant statue and crumbled it to dust.

Yes, there are some dual fulfillments in Joel 3, but that does not mean everything in Joel 3 has a dual fulfillment. The primary, and I think in some cases only, fulfillment is the one that fits our time frame and our context – which Peter tells us is Acts 2.

And if (as I think we have shown) these judgments against the nations occurred in Acts 2 when the kingdom of Christ was established, then the specific people who had done these specific things to the Jews were long dead, as were the Jews to which they had done these things.

These judgments in Joel 3 are not judgments against those individuals; these judgments are judgments against nations – against “all the nations” as Joel 3:2 tells us.

And I think this point will become increasingly evident as we move through this third chapter. Later in verse 13 we will read “put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe” and “go in, tread, for the winepress is full,” and then in verse 15 we will read that “the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.” Those aspects of the judgments are clearly figurative, and I think the aspects we are looking at now are likewise figurative.

As one commentator said, it is better to take these judgments “more rhetorically than literally.” And I think we must reach that conclusion if we are to maintain the time frame that we were given in Joel 3:1.

As for the Sabeans, they are described here as “a nation far away.” They are not shown on the Handout for Lesson 32, but the direction you would need to travel to reach them is shown, and that arrow points toward what is today the nation of Yemen. Perhaps the most famous Sabean was the Queen of Sheba, whom Jesus said had come “**from the ends of the earth** to hear the wisdom of Solomon” (Matthew 12:42).

I think the point here is not that the Jews would *literally* sell their enemies into Sabeian slavery, but rather is that God would, as verse 4 says, return their payment on their own head swiftly and speedily.

God would avenge his people by sending their enemies as far away in the opposite direction as they had sent the Jews. And, again, that makes sense only when Greece is still very far away, which points to an earlier rather than a later date for the book of Joel.

Joel 3:9-10

Joel 3:9-10 – 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. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, “I am a warrior.”

There are a few verses from Joel 3 that are very often the subjects of sermons. Verse 10 is one of them: “Let the weak say, ‘I am a warrior,’” and verse 14 is another one with its famous “Valley of Decision.”

And while I'm sure many of those sermons are quite good, I am equally sure that their reliance on these two verses is often misplaced.

Verse 10 has nothing at all to do with a weak child of God who needs a shot of courage, and verse 14 has nothing at all to do with people who need to decide whether or not to obey the gospel.

Remember where we are in Joel 3. God is judging all the nations of the world. And before that judgment is announced, God is gathering all the nations of the world together in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Verses 9 and 10 are part of that gathering of the nations.

Likewise, later in verse 14 we will find that the famous Valley of Decision is not a place for us to decide what to do with God, but rather is a place where God decides what to do with these nations. We will see that God is the one doing the deciding in the Valley of Decision just as God is the one doing the judging in the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

Verses 9 and 10 are a proclamation to the nations – and the first few words of the proclamation provide a good summary of the entire proclamation: **“Consecrate for war!”**

First, why the word “consecrate”? What does it mean to “consecrate” for war?

In ancient days, war was not seen as a secular activity. Instead, it was always seen as a religious activity. The pagan world would prepare for war by sacrificing to their false gods and by asking their false gods to grant them victory. And if they won the battle, then they would always see that victory as evidence that their gods were more powerful than the gods of their enemies.

And so why do we see a call here to “consecrate for war”? In a word, I think what we are seeing here is **sarcasm**. And, yes, there is sarcasm in the Bible. No one who has ever read the Bible could possibly say otherwise.

Do we remember what Elijah said to the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel?

1 Kings 18:27 – And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”

I think we see something similar here. God is telling these nations to go ahead and sacrifice to their false gods to seek their help in defeating him! Far from making God afraid as they no doubt hoped, God taunts them here by saying, “Don’t forget to pray to your gods! You are going to need all the help you can get!” There is a wonderful message lurking in that word “consecrate!”

Second, what is this war? Who is fighting whom?

This war is a war between God and all the nations of this world. God has gathered all of these nation in this valley for the purpose of this war. These nations have spent their time mopping up with the people of God, and so now God is planning to gather them all together for the purpose of mopping up with them instead! We might say that the picture here is that of the big brother showing up to take out the bullies who have been making life miserable for his little brother!

Do we remember what we saw back in Joel 2?

Joel 2:6-7 – Before them peoples are in anguish; **all faces grow pale**. Like **warriors** they charge; like **soldiers** they scale the wall. They march each on his way; they do not swerve from their paths.

And now what does God say here?

Consecrate for war; stir up the **mighty men**. Let all the **men of war** draw near; let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, "I am a **warrior**."

These mighty men thought they were really tough back in Joel 2 when they charged like warriors against the people of God, making their faces grow pale. And so, now, God says bring it on! Let's see who turns pale this time!

There is a wonderful reminder in verse 10 that we are looking at a judgment that occurred in Acts 2 when the church was established. I think we have already shown that in several ways, but I think we see it again here in verse 10.

One of the great prophecies about the church is that it would be a kingdom of peace – not of peace with the world, but of peace with God and with each other – and especially between Jew and Gentile.

We find some wonderful prophecies of the peace between Jew and Gentile in the kingdom of Christ.

Isaiah 2:4 – He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; **and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;** nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Micah 4:3 – He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; **and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;** nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

And, of course, we find the fulfillment of that great prophecy in the church, as described for us in Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:14-16 – For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

But here in verse 10 that wonderful prophecy is **reversed!** Instead of beating swords into plowshares, God tells the nations here to beat their plowshares into swords!

God's command here is a stark reminder that the peace in the kingdom of Christ is **not** peace with this world. We are at war with this world!

2 Corinthians 10:4-5 – For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

But that war has already been won! Jesus has already overcome this world. God has already defeated all the nations of this world. We wage that war today and we overcome that world today by being born into the kingdom of Christ. And our faith is the victory!

1 John 5:4 – For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith.

The command here in verse 10 to beat plowshares into swords is an unmistakable reference to the church.

When we read verse 10 we think immediately of the great prophecies about the church in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4. But we also immediately notice the reversal here in verse 10.

While the children of God will experience peace with God, the nations of this world will experience war with God. And, of course, there is no doubt at all about how that war will turn out!

Isaiah 54:16-17 – Behold, I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose. I have also created the ravager to destroy; no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD and their vindication from me, declares the LORD.

And no one opposed to God is exempt from this command to gather for battle. Even those who might normally stay home (such as the weak) are told here to mobilize for war – let the weak say, “I am a

warrior.” No one arrayed against God will escape this coming judgment against the nations of this world. No one is on the sideline.

Joel 3:11

Joel 3:11 – Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors, O LORD.

From the standpoint of textual criticism, one commentary describes verse 11 as “the most difficult verse in the book.”

The big issue is whether the warriors at the end of the verse are fighting **for** God or fighting **against** God.

In the ESV, as we just read, the warriors are fighting **for** God – they are God’s warriors. “Bring down **your** warriors, O LORD.”

But the Latin Vulgate is quite different, as we can see from the Catholic translation of the same verse:

Joel 3:11 – Break forth, and come, all ye nations from round about, and gather yourselves together: **there will the Lord cause all thy strong ones to fall down.**

So which is it? Are these warriors fighting for God or against God? As usual, we can't say for sure. And, also as usual, we can make perfect sense of either reading.

If these are God's soldiers, then they are most likely us – the church – given the time frame. We are God's army today while wearing the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:11) and destroying arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5).

And that may be correct, as most English translations have concluded – but I'm not so sure.

Remember where we are. We are in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. And remember what we saw earlier about the only choice for that valley that is actually associated with King Jehoshaphat – the Valley of Beracah in 2 Chronicles 20. And remember what happened to God's people in that valley – God destroyed their enemies without the King or the people having to even lift a finger!

2 Chronicles 20:15 – ...Thus says the LORD to you, 'Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, **for the battle is not yours but God's.**'

If this Valley of Jehoshaphat is the Valley of Beracah, then I think we must conclude that these soldiers in verse 11 are not God's soldiers but

instead are soldiers fighting against God. But no matter how many soldiers show up on the other side, God will defeat them.

If, instead, these soldiers are God's soldiers, then perhaps that means we need to rethink what we said about this valley. Perhaps it is the Valley of Kidron or the Jezreel Valley rather than the Valley of Beracah – but I still favor the Valley of Beracah, which means I also favor the view that the soldiers in verse 11 are fighting against God. Rather than bringing down **your** soldiers, I think the prayer here is that God will bring down **their** soldiers, which, of course, God does.

Now that we have looked at the **second** half of verse 11, let's back up and look at the **first** half: "Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there."

Think back for a moment about what we saw in the previous verse: "Beat your plowshares into swords." As we saw, that statement immediately made us think about the great prophecy of the church in Isaiah 2, but with a reversal. Rather than those **inside** the church beating their swords into plowshares, we saw those **outside** of the church beating their plowshares into swords.

I think we see something similar here.

- **Joel 3:11** – “Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there.”
- **Isaiah 2:2-3** – It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; **and all the nations shall flow to it**, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

In each case we see a gathering of the nations – but for a different purpose. Just as we saw in verse 10, I think in verse 11 we again are reminded of a great prophecy about the church – but with a reversal.

In Isaiah 2, God is calling and gathering the nations to come and hear the word of the Lord so that they can all be taught about his ways and walk in his paths. God is calling the nations in Isaiah 2 to hear the gospel so that they can obey it and be added to the kingdom of Christ.

But not so here in verse 11. Yes, God is calling and gathering the nations in verse 11, but he is doing so for a different purpose – **judgment**. Those

nations being gathered in verse 11 are not coming to be taught by God, but instead they are coming to wage war against God. These nations are opposed to God. They are arrayed against God.

And perhaps we are just seeing two sides of the same coin in these two verses. In Isaiah 2:2 we see those who obey God, but in Joel 3:11 we see those who disobey God.

The gospel of Christ is the great divider of this world. The gospel splits the world into two parts – those who obey the gospel and those who reject the gospel. Isaiah 2 tells us about the first group. Joel 3 tells us about the second group.