



God's Justice and Faithfulness (Joel 3)

Lesson 9

In the end, is it really worth it to serve God? That's a question that has been asked over and over throughout the history of Israel and the church. We find that question asked many times in Scripture, as the inspired authors wrestled with this very honest, very human question. Take, for example, God's chosen nation of Israel. Has it really been worth it for them to be his people? Consider the recent news cycle. Hamas has again resumed their aggression against Israel by firing thousands of rockets into the country, seeking to hit highly populated areas. This most recent aggression is just the tip of the iceberg of abuse that Israel has faced, an abuse that has followed the holocaust, the pogroms, the Roman occupation and destruction of the temple, all throughout history Israel has been a country battered and bruised and beaten down by nations¹ larger and more powerful than them. Israel longed for a time when God would come and set everything right.

God acknowledges that desire and sends the prophets to assure the small, fledgling country that he will one day come and do just that. The passage that we are studying today shows God's concern and compassion for his people and assures them that the day is coming, the Day of the Lord, when he will address the wrong that Judah has faced at the hands of her enemies. As we get the chance to look in and see God's plan for Israel's future, it should give us confidence as well. Not because we are Israel, but because the God who vindicates and rewards his people in the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. God has promised that he will address the wrongs done to Israel, and we can rest assured that God will address the wrongs done to us as well.

What purpose does suffering and persecution have in God's plans? Why does he allow the righteous to suffer?

¹ In the KJV, the terms "heathen," (3:11-12) "Gentiles," (3:9) "people" (only in 3:8) and "nations" (3:2) all translate the same basic Hebrew word *goy* (plural *goyim*). All of these terms are accurate translations, as the term *goy* is only rarely used for Israel, and thus the *goyim* (nations) are the Gentiles and are thus heathen. While the KJV does create more variety and interest with their translational choice to use different words for *goy*, it may be easy to lose track of the focus this passage has on God's dealing with the nations and to read more into a certain word choice than was intended by the original Hebrew.

How can believers have confidence in God when going through dark seasons like Judah and Israel and countless others before us have had to face?

I. God's Just Judgment on Judah's Enemies (3:1-16)

No doubt the nation of Judah wondered why God waited so long for his judgment. By this point in the nation's history, she had faced repeated attacks from Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and others (3:4). She would later face the likes of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and on and on the list goes. But in the midst of all of this conquest and suffering, the message of Joel shines through: God will certainly one day do something about all of these nations that are taking advantage of Israel and Judah.

How does knowing the end make enduring persecution better?

A. The reasons for God's anger at Judah's enemies.

The first section of this prophecy begins by warning that God will be bringing judgment, and then lays out the charges against the surrounding nations for why it is that they will be judged. We don't know all the details of when and how all of this happened historically, but we do know that what is described here is fairly common practice for ancient warfare.

1. The surrounding nations have sent Judah into captivity (1-3, 6).

It was common during these times for foreign enemies to deport large portions of the population to another place after victory, including taking them back as slaves to the victorious country. Apparently, that had been done to Judah by several of her surrounding neighbors, and some Jews had even been sold to nations as far off as Greece!

2. The surrounding nations have divided up the holy land (2).

God is upset not just that the people have been sold into slavery, but because his precious holy land has been divided up as the spoils of war. The land of Israel was important to God, it was given to Abraham and his descendants by God himself, and watching foreign nations dividing up God's land didn't set too well with God.

3. The surrounding nations have mistreated the children of Judah (3).

The selling of the people of Judah was done in an especially calloused and selfish way. The value of human life was traded in so that people in these other nations could enjoy the fleshly pleasure of alcohol and immorality. Joel intentionally sets up the contrast between the innocent boy and girl who have been sold for something empty and base to demonstrate the wicked way in which Judah has been abused.

4. The surrounding nations have looted the country (5).

Finally, these nations stole from the national treasury, perhaps including the Temple itself. "You have taken my stuff" God essentially says, and the robbery of the sacred treasury upsets God and brings his anger against these invading armies.

In a variety of ways, Judah had been abused and taken advantage of. Through all of this they no doubt wondered if God was watching and if he was going to do anything about it. Joel takes chapters 1-2 to turn the mirror on the problems within Judah that needed to be addressed first, but then he turns to the foreign nations and let's Judah know that yes, he sees. And no, he's not okay with it.

What are some ways that the unrighteous take advantage of the righteous today?

In the book of Joel, why does God start with Judah's problems before turning to the issue of the nations around Judah? How can we learn from this? In what ways are we tempted to look at the problems around us instead looking at our own problems?

B. God's response to the surrounding nations.

God has seen the wickedness that has been done to Israel. That is the main point of the first 6 verses or so of this chapter. But God goes beyond simply stating that he has seen to telling everyone what he is going to do about.

1. God will bring their own deeds back to haunt them (4, 7-8).

As we've seen before, one of the ways God addresses the wrongdoing of some is by bringing their very actions back on their head. The New Testament calls this "reaping what you sow" (cf Galatians 6:7-8). We call this "what goes around comes around." These enemies had sold Judah into captivity, now they would be sold into captivity by Judah (vv 7-8). Twice God tells these nations that he will return their payment on their head (vv 4, 7).

2. God will gather the nations to battle (2, 9-16).

God promises in this passage to round up all the pagan nations to come against him for battle. He taunts them, challenging them to come against him and do their worst. This theme is introduced in verse 2 when God promises to gather the nations, but Joel really develops the idea starting in verse 9 where a proclamation goes out among the nations (KJV, Gentiles) to get ready for war. God threatens that they had better bring everything they have. They should turn their farming equipment into weapons and let even the weakest members of society become a warrior (Heb – *gibborim*; KJV – strong). The end is a foregone conclusion: God soundly defeats them and begins judging them for their sins.

Can you think of any other passages in Scripture that ask why the foolish nations of the world would dare to fight against the Lord?

Why do you think people will fight in this battle, a battle they have no chance of winning?

3. God will judge them for their evil (2, 12-14)

Joel starts off this chapter by describing what God's plan for the nations is once he has gathered them all and soundly defeated them: he will sit in judgment on them for all the wicked that they have done. As with God's plan to gather the nations, this theme is developed more fully in the second part of this chapter, particularly verses 12-14.

Joel describes all the nations coming down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, a word that in Hebrew means "Yahweh judges." Because their wickedness is so great, God looks down and sees many, many people in this valley awaiting a decision. The decision here is not what these nations will decide, it's too late for that. They've made their choice. The decision is the verdict, the decision of the Judge for what penalty these nations will face for their abuse of the God's people.

Verse 13 essentially says, "Alright, that's enough wickedness; it's time to do something about this." Why doesn't God give clearer indications of how much wickedness "is enough?" Why do you think he would leave that vague? What value is there in knowing that God does have a line somewhere, even if we can't see it and might draw it differently?

II. God's Faithful Blessings on the Nation of Israel (3:16-21)

This passage does not end on a note of judgment, however, but on a note of peace. God brings justice in Joel 3, but he also is faithful to his promises. When God vindicates his people, it will mean judgment and destruction for her enemies, but it will mean peace for the nation of Israel. Verse 16 serves as a hinge verse that connects these two ideas. God will roar from Jerusalem,² causing all of heaven and earth to shake. When he does so, he will not only bring judgment, but he will also be a place of refuge for his people.

A. God will provide peace for Judah (3:16-17, 19-20).

The first thing God assures Judah of is the fact that there will be no more enemy to harass them. Strangers aren't going to pass through, likely meaning that the city will be seen as sacred and foreigners won't just carelessly and disrespectfully walk through her borders. Judah's enemies, such as Egypt and Edom, will become desolate because of their wrong behavior, but Judah would be inhabited forever.

While this is referring ultimately to the millennial kingdom when Judah will be kept safe and secure, we also know that God has promised the believer that he too will be protected and secure in God's eternal home. We can confidently look forward to the time when our enemies are defeated and we can live in peace without fear of them.

² The name "Zion" shows up frequently throughout this chapter, often parallel with "Jerusalem." The two terms are synonyms for the capital city of Judah. Often "Zion" is used in a positive sense and emphasizes the spiritual character of the city, but this need not necessarily be the case every time it is used.

What enemies does the believer face today that will no longer be present in the millennium and the eternal state?

B. God will provide prosperity for Judah (3:18)

As we saw in chapter 2, God promises during the final restoration to open up the floodgates of blessing. Wine, milk, and fresh water were all seen as signs of God's blessing and of his divine approval. The return of these blessings indicated that the sins of Israel and Judah were taken care of and that their relationship with their Creator was made right again. While we aren't always promised material blessings for obedience on this earth, we know that God's blessings often do follow obedience. Our ultimate eternal rewards, although they are far greater than mere physical blessings, do certainly include material blessings!

C. God will provide his own presence for Judah (3:17-18, 21).

But we see that both the peace and the prosperity that is promised here comes because of a relationship with God. Jerusalem's peace and security come from the fact that the Lord dwells there (3:17). The spring that waters the land comes from the Temple (3:18). Finally, the book ends with the statement that Jerusalem and Judah will be forgiven their sins because "the Lord dwelleth in Zion."

In what ways are God's blessings still connected to a relationship with him? What happens when we forget this important principle?

"Why does God wait?" While that is a challenging question that many have wrestled with, in this lesson we get at least part of the answer: He won't wait forever. A Day is coming, the Day of the Lord. In that Day God will gather the nations and judge them for their wickedness. His wrath against their sins is building, and one day he will tell the angels it's time for harvest.

Yet even in his judgment there is mercy and there is faithfulness. God will judge in part out of his faithfulness to his people. Those who have a relationship with him will rejoice to see him take up earthly residence in Jerusalem and to pour out blessing after blessing on his people. This is the day of the Lord in Joel. A day of dealing with his erring people. A day of judging the wicked nations. And a day of vindication and restoration for his people.

But the day of the Lord is near, or at least that's what Joel says on several occasions (Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14). So has it happened? When will it happen? And what does the New Testament think of the "Day of the Lord"? We will answer these questions in our next and final lesson.