

“All the Prophets Testify”: Joel 3:13-21

Midweek Bible Study – 2025 October 22

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<https://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies/prophets>

Invocation & Opening Prayer

Follow-up to last class: pace, depth, other comments or questions

Outline (*TLSB* p.1448):

- I. Catastrophes Current and Coming (1:2-2:17)
 - A. The Current Catastrophe: The Locust Plague (1:2-20)
 - B. The Coming Catastrophe: The Day of the Lord (2:1-17)
- II. The Lord’s Response (2:18-3:21)
 - A. To the Locust Plague: Healing and Restoration (2:18-27)
 - B. To the Coming Day of the Lord (2:28-3:21)
 - 1. Salvation for the survivors who escape (2:28-32 [heading?])
 - 2. Judgment of the Nations (3:1-21)
 - a. Summons and accusations (3:1-12)
 - b. The nations are sentenced, while Judah is blessed (3:13:21)**

The Lord’s Response to the Coming Day of the Lord (2:28-3:21) continues with the Judgment of the Nations (3:1-21), the second part of which (3:13-21) can be seen as “The nations are sentenced, while Judah is blessed” (*TLSB*; Allen sees multiple strophes and changes of speakers, but the latter hardly seem to be necessary):

3:13 *sickle ... harvest ... tread ... winepress ... vats ... evil*: Laetsch suggests the command is given to the Lords’s angels, and Allen refers to “the fiery chariots and horses seen around Elisha (2 K. 6:17) and ‘the ten thousands of holy ones’ of Deut. 33:2.” *CSSB* refers to the loss of the harvest in 2:3 and the restoration of the harvest in 2:19, 22, 24, and 26, but this verse is referring to something else, although that harvest may point to this harvest. We might think that sickle and harvest relate to grain and repentant believers (so Keil-Delitzsch), or that sickle and harvest relate to wheat as unrepentant unbelievers (confer *TLSB* and Laetsch), but instead we might see a progression from harvest to processing to storage all of grapes and unrepentant unbelievers (Allen refers back to the vats in 2:24). Why grapes that produce joy-inducing wine (3:18!) are used for evil I did not see anyone suggest. In reference to the evil, *TLSB* comments, “God’s enemies shall receive what their deeds have earned”, and again we connect those deeds to the underlying unrepentant unbelief. We saw somewhat similar “grapes of wrath” (the title of American author John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel, supposedly drawing the phrase from Julia Ward Howe’s 1861 “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, with Steinbeck using the phrase at the end of chapter 25) and “grim reaper” imagery in Revelation 14:14-20, where arguably the grain was believers and the grapes were unbelievers, and a sickle, though not usually used in harvesting grapes, apparently was used for harvesting both. Keil-Delitzsch rejects the idea that treading the wine-press in Joel means wading in blood. (As we see this and other Revelation similarities in this Joel passage, we remember that the Holy Spirit inspired Joel and other prophets before Revelation, and so that the Divinely-inspired John is drawing on them, not their drawing on him.) Keil-Delitzsch notes that, while the command given in the verse is not said to be executed, the judgment suggests is depicted in the following verses.

3.14 *Multitudes, multitudes*: Roehrs-Franzmann notes that the Hebrew word translated “multitudes” “suggests both numbers and noise”, and Keil-Delitzsch says the repetition expresses the great multitude (though it is not “multitudes of multitudes”, like “myriads of myriads”). If, as we think is the case, this prophecy points to the final judgment of all people who every have existed, exist now, or will exist (from our perspective), then there truly will be great multitudes of people. There will be a fixed number, even if it might be beyond the Old Testament people’s or even our ability to count (although Google’s AI Overview says there is no upper limit to how high we can count, since numbers go on infinitely).

valley of decision ... valley of decision: earlier references in 3:2 and 12 were to the “Valley of Jehoshaphat”, which means “the judgment of Yahweh”, but in this verse a different Hebrew word, *charuwts*, is used twice for “decision”, which word elsewhere has been translated “threshing instrument” and so could continue the idea of harvesting from 3:13, though Keil-Delitzsch rejects that connection. *CSSB* says the change emphasizes the Heavenly Judge’s decision or judicial decree executed in the valley, as it were, though Allen suggests the change “reinforces the significance of the Valley as the place where God carries out his judicial sentence” (typical commentators’ completely opposite opinions). At 3:12 we noted that a reference to the literal “Valley of Jehoshaphat” near Jerusalem seems un-likely and that more-likely is a figurative reference to judgment on the whole earth of all the living (“quick”) and all the resurrected dead at the time of Christ’s return in glory on the Last Day (no secret rapture or any other resurrections or judgments, just the one).

day of the Lord is near: reference could be to the broader period of the Messianic Age’s being “near”, though in the immediate context, preceding and following, the more-specific Last Day seems to be in view (confer also 3:18). As for the “nearness”, Keil-Delitzsch appears to have the Day of the Lord “near” to the valley of decision, but says it “bursts at once”. *TLSB* comments, “On a personal level, the day of the Lord is always near, since we do not know when we will die and be judged according to what we believed and practiced during our earthly days.” Our and all people’s living each day with contrition and faith (repentance) is called for!

3:15 *The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining*: the description in this verse is similar to that description in 2:30-31. We might think of the sun’s light as reflected off of the moon and note the anthropomorphizing of the stars (as if they have a human will to withdraw their shining). Allen refers to “the horrifying reaction of nature to the theophany of Yahweh in judgment wrath.”

3:16 *The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem*: the two lines presumably are poetically parallel. The Lord is the subject of the second line; though the proper noun is not repeated, the verb is a third-person masculine singular “he” (though the ESV leaves it out). *TLSB* comments, “God’s pronouncements of judgment are repeatedly compared to the terrifying roar of a lion”, though *TLSB* does not give any other examples. *CSSB* refers to God’s at the head of His army’s thundering against Jerusalem in 2:11. (I always think of the “God mic” from a control room to a TV studio.) Zion and Jerusalem can refer to the same thing (compare 3:17). We might think about the different ways that the Lord can speak—even through His called, ordained, and sent messengers—and of His voice going out from one location through all the world.

and the heavens and the earth quake: presumably “heavens” as the “skies” and not “heaven” as the place of God’s abode. The Last Day, of course, brings new/restored sky and land/earth/ground. The unrepentant unbelievers have reason to quake in fear, but the repentant believers do not, as the following couplet makes clear.

But the Lord is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel: the Lord is named again only in the first line but presumably also the subject of the second line. “Refuge” (*machaceh*) and “stronghold” (*ma’owz*) are cast parallel, as are “his people” and “the people of Israel” (compare Judah in 3:18 and 19). Predication is done without any verbs, and the ESV’s present tense seems consistent with the context, in which other present-tense verbs are used for the future Last Day described as if it were already happening. With Reformation Day coming up, we might note that Psalm 46 uses “refuge” (*machaceh*) and “fortress” (*misgab*), leading to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther’s well-known hymn.

3:17 *So you shall know that I am the Lord your God*: the ESV translates with “so” a simple Hebrew conjunction that could be “and”, though there does seem to be some cause and effect connection between the preceding and the following. Keil-Delitzsch comments, “From the fact that He only destroys His enemies, and protects His own people, the latter [that is, His people] will learn that He is their God” and the rest. Specifically who the plural “you” subject of the verb is is unexpressed. The tense is presumably future, and, if Joel’s contemporary hearers in the day of his prophecy are there to experience the fulfillment past the judgment itself, then they presumably are believers, though God in some sense is everyone’s God, and on the Last Day every knee will bow and every tongue confess Him (Philippians 2:10-11; on the point, confer Laetsch). At some point faith becomes sight (confer 2 Corinthians 5:7), and the conviction that we have now by faith becomes certain knowledge in a different sense (Hebrews 11:1).

who dwells in Zion, my holy mountain: note the mention of Zion and Jerusalem in 3:16 and the mention of Jerusalem in the line that follows this one, as well as Jerusalem in 3:20 and the Lord’s dwelling in Zion in 3:21. *TLSB* comments, “Here, the temple mountain of Jerusalem represents both the people of God (the spiritual Israel) and the new heaven and earth (Rv 21:1-2).” Perhaps more significant is *CSSB*’s comment that “The Lord himself will dwell with them”, and *CSSB* refers to Psalm 46 (and Revelation 21:3), which psalm has other connections to this Joel passage that we noted above (and confer Allen). Keil-Delitzsch comment, “For Zion or Jerusalem is of course not the Jerusalem of the earthly Palestine, but the sanctified and glorified city of the living God, in which the Lord will be eternally united with His redeemed, sanctified, and glorified church.”

And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall never again pass through it: note the mention of Jerusalem and Zion in 3:16 and the mention of Zion in the line that precedes this one, as well as Jerusalem in 3:20 and Zion in 3:21. God is holy, of course, and in the Old Testament used His ceremonial law to protect lesser-holy people. On the Last Day with the glorification of the body (and, presumably, souls that have not yet been glorified) that takes place in the vision that the saints have of God, repentant believers will be completely and only holy (no more *simul justus et peccator*), and unrepentant unbelievers will be in hell for eternal torment. The pagan conquerors of Jerusalem often defiled the Temple (Laetsch refers to Shishak of Egypt as the first to desecrate the Temple [1 Kings 14:25-26], and see the mention of Egypt in 3:19), but they will not even enter the city (confer Revelation 21: *TLSB* refers to vv.4 and 8, but v.27 seems more on point, along with Revelation 22:15).

3:18 *And in that day*: confer 3:14, though note the contrast between the destruction described there and the blessings described in this verse. *CSSB* comments, “The Edenic lushness pictured in this verse is in great contrast to the drought in 1:10”.

mountains ... sweet wine ... hills ... milk ... streambeds ... water: the first couplet sets mountains and hills somewhat parallel but with different blessings of wine and milk. The second couplet has streambeds of Judah flowing with water, which seemingly could be taken either as a third item in the preceding series (that is, mountains, hills, streambeds) or a first item in the following series (that is, water as a noun and water as a verb). The hills arguably flow in their streambeds that flow. Regardless, *TLSB* comments, “Picture language describing the overflowing abundance and well-being enjoyed in God’s presence.” (Confer the mentions of Judah in 3:19 and 20; compare the mention of Israel in 3:16.) Keil-Delitzsch note that the mountains and hills were the least-fruitful part of the kingdom at Joel’s time, that the streambed will not dry up in the hot season, and that “Thus will the fruitfulness of Canaan, the land of the Lord, flowing with milk and honey, come forth in all its potency” (for example, Exodus 3:8). Luther sees refreshing the strong and milk refreshing the weak and later refers to their both being mentioned in Genesis 49:12. Allen suggests that the highland pastures would be so rich that the cattle grazing there would produce an excessive amount of milk, “as if it ran from the very ground”.

fountain ... from the house of the Lord ... water the Valley of Shittim: *TLSB* notes that the Valley of Shittim is west of Jerusalem; *CSSB* refers to the valley of “acacias”, which the NIV translates (with “Valley of Shittim” in the margin), and so *CSSB* notes that “Since acacias flourish in dry soil, the picture is that of a well-watered desert” (see also Roehrs-Franzmann, who notes the valley “cannot be certainly identified”, though Keil-Delitzsch seems to have some certain thoughts about it, and confer Laetsch and Luther, as well as Allen). The idea of water’s springing forth like a fountain and flowing from the Temple to water desert places is not unique to this Spirit-inspired prophecy through Joel: see, for example, Ezekiel 47:1-12, where the water increases in depth and on its banks waters trees, the fruit of which is for food and the leaves of which are for healing (confer Revelation 22:1-2; Allen makes another connection to Psalm 46). *TLSB* refers to Jesus as the source of “living water” in John 4:14, but perhaps John 7:37-38 (read as parallel half verses) is equally, if not more, on point. Maybe the mention of the water’s going out from the Temple to the Valley of Shittim and thereby reversing its situation leads to the mentions of Egypt and Edom and reversals of their situations in what follows (to some extent confer Allen, who refers specifically to Egypt’s Nile).

3:19 *Egypt ... desolation ... Edom a desolate wilderness*: one verb functions for both subjects, and what they are described as becoming are related etymologically (and arguably relate to what precedes, as noted above). You may remember that the Edomites or Idumeans were descendants of Jacob/Israel’s brother Esau; the land of Edom or Idumea was south and south-east of Palestine. *TLSB* comments, “Traditional nemeses of Israel represent all those opposed to God and His people” (confer *CSSB*), and *CSSB* comments, “Figures for the removal of all life-sustaining blessings, thus setting in sharp focus the contrasting destinies of God’s people and the enemies of God’s kingdom. This picture of desolation also recalls the earlier description of Judah’s condition (2:3).”

for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land: a simple preposition explains the reason for the transformation just described. The Hebrew text has no verb (the ESV adds “done”), but, as the following parallel line makes clear, Egypt and Edom have done the violence to the descendants of Judah (the primary tribe of the Southern Kingdom [confer 3:18 and 20]). The “they” and “their” referring to two different groups can be confusing: so, to be clearer, Egypt and Edom have shed innocent blood in the descendants of Judah’s land (though compare Keil-Delitzsch). More than a simple act of violence, the shedding of “innocent” blood on the land is a particular abomination. See the mention of apparently the Judeans’ blood also in 3:21. We should always be careful with terms such as “innocent”: the people of Judah were not sinless, of course, but in some sense were not guilty of what they received (confer our use of “innocent” with aborted children, for example: they are sinful by nature from the moment of their conception).

3:20 *But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations:* the Hebrew conjunction could be “and” but “but” seems more appropriate given the following contrast. On Judah, confer 3:18 and 19, and compare 3:16; confer also Jerusalem in 3:16 and 17. Now no one may ever live in Egypt and Edom again, but henceforth Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem will always be inhabited (understanding “to all generations” may be somewhat problematic if there is no more procreation). *TLSB* comments, “The heavenly Jerusalem will be a place of undisturbed peace and eternal life for God’s people”, and we might emphasize that that heavenly Jerusalem comes down earth in Revelation 21:2 and in some sense represents the new earth under the new heaven.

3:21 *I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged:* confer the mention of apparently the Judeans’ “innocent” blood in 3:19. The Lord seemingly promises to “avenge” blood that He apparently has not previously “avenged”, though compare Keil-Delitzsch (and note that Allen discusses translational issues). Laetsch comments, “God does not always at once avenge the blood of His Christians shed for their faithfulness to Him”, and Laetsch eventually refers to Revelation 6:10-11 (confer Allen). On this Wednesday of Pentecost XIX (after Sunday hearing *Lutheran Service Book* Three-Year Proper 24 C), we can think of the widow’s seeking “justice”, or “vengeance”, from the unrighteous Judge in Luke 18:1-8, and Jesus’s there promising that God will speedily give “justice”, or “vengeance”, to His elect on the Last Day. *TLSB* comments simply, “The Lord will not allow any evil committed against His people to go unpunished. Thus Satan and his cohorts will be cast into the lake of fire (Rv 20:7-10)”, and we might add, for example, Revelation 19:20.

for the Lord dwells in Zion: confer 3:17, and consider the various referents. *TLSB* comments, “The ever-present Lord of Israel will accomplish all these glorious things.” More seems to be meant, perhaps, such as the Lord’s dwelling with His people as He promises to do (confer above). We might also think of the Lord’s Prayer’s Introduction and Conclusion, His being in Heaven and having “the power and the glory forever and ever”, as meaning that He is capable of doing as He promises in this case (Allen translates “as surely as” the Lord dwells in Zion). *CSSB* comments that because the Lord dwells in Zion “all is right with those who trust in God and live with him”, perhaps similar to the popular, “God’s in His heaven— / All’s right with the world!” (from English poet Robert Browning’s “Pippa’s Song”, part of his 1841 “verse drama” titled *Pippa Passes*). Roehrs-Franzmann refers to the triumphant ending of Ezekiel’s vision of the restored Jerusalem (Ezekiel 48:35), “And the name of the city henceforth shall be, The Lord is there” (and Laetsch similarly refers to the note of triumph at the end of Obadiah).

What are you taking home from the prophecy considered tonight?

TLSB's Law and Gospel Application Note for 3:17-21 says, "Joel promises a final vindication and everlasting abundance for God's people. Given the inevitability of judgment, dreadful punishments await those who reject God and His purposes. Repent daily and strive continually to enter by the narrow gate. Receive limitless grace from the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. Through Him, you shall indeed come home to the Father." (We might both add God's first initiating our salvation and point to God's Means by which He gives His limitless grace.)

Next time, October 29, Jonah Introduction.

Closing Prayer & Benediction