

Come, for God Sits to Judge

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[0 : 00] Let's pray.

God our Father, thank you that you speak to us in the scripture and we pray that you'll write this word on our hearts that we may not only believe it, but trust it, obey it, so that Jesus may be glorified.

Amen. It strikes me that we people are an odd mix in a way. On the one hand, we often wish for, think, and maybe even believe that God loves everyone so much that everyone will be in heaven, whoever, regardless.

But on the other hand, we actually have quite a craving for justice. And we don't like it when people who are guilty of wrongdoing of some sort get off.

So probably our gut feeling is that we want to see Bradley Murdoch brought to justice properly for the murder of Peter Falconio in that Outback murder case that's the committal trials in Darwin at the moment.

[1 : 26] And we probably want to see Saddam Hussein brought to some proper justice for the atrocities that he committed in Iraq over many years. We probably think the same sort of thing about Milosevic at the Hague in the International Court for the war crimes in Bosnia.

Maybe years ago we felt rather disappointed or cheated that Idi Amin seemed to have a fairly comfortable exilic life in Saudi Arabia until he died in the last year or two.

We dislike injustice, rightly so. And we don't like seeing guilty people get off free. We want justice to be done. In this life, of course, justice is not always done.

Guilty people do sometimes get off free. The innocent people, on the other hand, sometimes are wrongly accused and charged or imprisoned or suffer consequences.

Our human systems are imperfect. Our legal systems are often so complicated there are too many loopholes. People involved are perhaps open to corruption or bias or misinformation or prejudice or some form of confusion.

[2 : 39] That's the way it is in our life. It's not a perfect life. Justice doesn't always happen in this life. Injustice sometimes happens and sometimes the guilty seem to prosper from their wrongdoing.

But throughout the Bible, from early to the end of the Bible, God promises there will be final justice that is right and fair and proper.

He promises, in effect, a final Nuremberg trial where the guilty will be brought to eternal justice. Where each one of us, each person who's ever lived, from whatever country, whatever age, will be brought before the judgment seat of God.

As we'll say in the Creed later on, a summary of Christian faith, to judge the living and the dead. There is, in the end, as the Bible consistently teaches throughout its pages, a final separation.

It's not simply a case that everyone will end up in a sort of happy heaven. But there will be a separation, whether the sheep or the goats or whatever. That is, there will be justice.

[3 : 48] And wrongdoers will be rightly punished by God. But that end separation is not a straightforward distinction between the good and the bad. It's not the good who will end up in heaven and the bad who will be excluded.

Rather, it's more subtle and more important than that. It's a distinction that we need to get right. And the book of Joel, so consistent with much of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, shows us that distinction.

And in its pages. In this book of Joel, from sometime in the Old Testament period of history, that is in the centuries leading up to Jesus, we saw in the first of the sermons from this book, in the first chapter of Joel, that the people of God themselves had turned from God.

They'd perhaps gone after other gods. They'd disobeyed God's laws. They'd shunned him. And as a result, God had sent to inflict upon them some forms of punishment. A locust plague that had ravaged their land.

A drought to follow that up. So the land was parched and seed and crops failed. Fire, bushfire perhaps. Enemy threats as well.

[4 : 59] And so as a result, the people were impoverished and hungry. The land was desolate and its economy crippled. And we saw that in chapter 1 in particular. The first half at least.

But then we saw through the rest of chapter 1 and the first half of chapter 2, that God was calling the people to respond to him. So that they turned their backs on him.

And as a result, God had inflicted various things upon them in order to provoke them, the people of God, to return to God. To lament for their failures. To be sorrowful about it.

But more than just being sad, to actually turn from their failures, from their sins, and turn back to God. That is to repent of their sins. And so we found in the book of Joel, especially the first half of chapter 2, that through Joel the priests were to call a solemn fasting day.

A day of penitence and repentance. A day of turning back to God. A day of sorrow. A day of repentance. To throw themselves at God's feet for mercy.

[6 : 01] And we saw that especially in the first half of chapter 2. But then we saw in the third sermon, two weeks ago, that God in response will reverse the crippling situation of the land.

So he'll restore the fortunes of the people. He'll refill the wine vats. He'll replenish their threshing floors. He'll destroy the locusts. So bad and big was the locust plague that they will smell the stench of the rotting locusts washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Sea. And we saw that in the second half of chapter 2. Now accompanying all of that, that restoration of the people of God and their land, accompanying that, we now find the destruction of the enemies of the people of God.

The enemies of God himself. So we see at the beginning of chapter 3. Firstly, a cry for a massive international assembly. For then in those days and at that time when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down, not to Athens for some Olympic Games ceremony, but I'll bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat.

Jehoshaphat, which literally means, though Jehoshaphat had been a king, Jehoshaphat literally means God's judgment. So I will bring them to the valley of God's judgment and I will enter into judgment with them there on account of my people and my heritage Israel.

[7 : 30] Now, God is summoning the nations of the world to a particular place near Jerusalem, it seems, to judge them.

What crimes have they committed? God now turns from calling them to assemble to listing their crimes. At the end of verse 2 we read that they scattered God's people among the nations.

That implies that some of these nations at least have in some way inflicted defeat upon the people of God and carried off the leaders, the priests, the wealthy people, whoever, into exile, scattering them amongst other nations.

That was certainly the policy of many of the conquering nations in Old Testament times. The Babylonians, the Assyrians practiced that. If they won a victory over another nation, then they would take off its leadership and its wealthy people.

The idea being that it would weaken the Israelites so that they would be less of a threat to rise up against the empire. Secondly, the crime of these nations is that they divided God's land at the end of verse 2.

[8 : 34] That is, the land of God settled by the people of God, they now divided it up. So perhaps the Babylonians said to the Edomites, You take that bit of land and have it for yourselves. We'll keep this.

And you guys up the north, you Syrians or people from Tyre, you keep these bits of land. And the Philistines over there, well, you keep this bit of land. Dividing up God's land amongst themselves. Thirdly, we're told at the beginning of verse 3, They cast lots for my people.

Perhaps similar to dividing up the land, they took the people with them, made them slaves. And then finally, and maybe worst of all, They traded boys for prostitutes and sold girls for wine and drunk it down.

That is, from amongst God's own people, he conquered Israelites or Jews. They sold off the children as slaves to others. And with the proceeds and the profits, they bought drink and bought prostitutes.

God is going to judge them for those actions. And notice the implication there, because through those two verses, verses 2 and 3, It is my people, my heritage, my land, my people, God speaking.

[9 : 41] That is, you might think that you've just conquered a little land here, Judah or Israel, But it is mine. And you've got to account for that to me, to God.

You might have picked on a little weak nation, But you've actually picked on me. And time and again in the scriptures we see that. That when people persecute the people of God, they're actually persecuting God.

We saw it when Saul, later to become Paul, became a Christian on the road to Damascus. Why do you persecute me? Jesus said to him. So what God is saying here is that he is fundamentally identified with his people.

And when we are under attack as Christians from people who are not Christians, God is under attack. And God will spring to our defense. Now it may not be an immediate retribution.

That is, he didn't stop the nation being defeated. He didn't stop the nation suffering from the locust plague and the drought and the fire and so on. But God ultimately will come to the rescue of his people.

[10 : 42] And will ultimately bring justice to bear. So there's reassurance here, it seems to me, for suffering Christians. Not that we will not suffer. Not that we will not be persecuted.

Not that even we will not face the effects of persecution. Martyrdom or economic disadvantage as so many of our brothers and sisters in other countries face. Much worse than we do.

But we are reassured that God will bring justice in his time ultimately, finally and fairly. And that day is coming.

And it's coming soon. Well he goes on in particular to accuse the people of Tyre and Sidon in verse 4. Towns in north of Israel, in Lebanon and Syria.

To accuse them of their crimes. And also the Philistines who live around the Gaza Strip as it's called today. Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads swiftly and speedily.

[11 : 41] And so often the way God punishes sinners is to let them suffer the consequences of their sins. Which have so often inbuilt within them their own punishment.

And that seems to be implying what he's saying here. What have these people done? Verse 5. They've taken God's silver and gold and carried his rich treasures into their temples.

That presumably means they've plundered the temple in Jerusalem. And used the gold and the ornaments and so on for their own temples and idolatrous worship. And secondly in verse 6.

They've sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks. That is as slaves. So they've made incursions or conquered Judah. And they've taken off some of the people and sold them away as slaves to make some profit from their military victory.

So as a result God threatens them with punishment in verses 7 and 8. I'll rouse those who've been sold to the Greeks. I'll rouse them to leave the places to which you've sold them.

[12 : 38] And I'll turn your deeds back upon your own heads. I'll sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the people of Judah. And they'll sell them on to the civilians to a nation far away for the Lord has spoken.

What you have done I'll do back to you. God is saying. I'll punish you for your sins. And I'll punish you appropriately for your sins. Well God then invites them again to come to the valley of Jehoshaphat.

As the chapter began. So now in verses 9 to 12 it resumes that theme. Come on then he's saying. Come together. Come to the valley of God's judgment. The valley of Jehoshaphat.

So verse 9 says. Proclaim this among the nations. Prepare war. Stir up the warriors. Let all the soldiers draw near. Let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords. And your pruning hooks into spears.

The reverse of what other prophets promise in a time of peace. God says. Come on you farmers. Pick up your agricultural implements. Beat them. Make them into military implements. And come.

[13 : 37] You've picked on Israel and Judah. Well come and pick on me. You think you've picked on a weak nation and conquered them. Well you've actually picked on me. So come on all of you. And he even says at the end of verse 10.

Let the weakling say I'm a warrior. That is. No excuse. All of you come. There's a sense in which he's mocking their might. You think you're mighty and you're strong.

Well you don't know who you've picked on. Come quickly all you nations all around. Gather yourselves there. Bring down your warriors oh Lord. Let the nations rouse themselves and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat.

The valley of God's judgment. For there I will sit to judge all the neighboring nations. Now God turns to address his own people.

He summons the nations together to judge them. And we assume that that's what he does. Now he turns to his own people it seems. And addresses them.

[14 : 38] And he says some words that are quite striking at first. Put in the sickle for the harvest is ripe. Go in tread for the winepress is full. The vats overflow.

And we may well think that what he's saying is a repeat of what we saw a couple of weeks ago from chapter 2. That God would restore the fortunes so that the wine vats would be full.

The threshing floors would be overflowing. And the harvest will be ready. Rather than suffering the ravages of locusts, the drought and the fire. But what God is actually saying here is that he's picking up that metaphor of a full harvest.

Not just to say I'll restore your fortunes, it'll be okay. But that this becomes the image, the illustration or the analogy for judgment. It's as though the sins of God's enemies have piled up and filled up.

And they are ready for harvesting. That is ready for judgment, for God's judgment against them. For the end of verse 13 says, For their wickedness is great.

[15 : 38] It's an image that's used in the book of Revelation as well, as well as in modern songs. God is trampling out the vintage where his grapes of wrath are stored. That's the image that's being used here.

God is ready to judge. The sins of his enemies are full to overflowing. Now is the time of judgment. And he's now reassuring his own people, Judah, that he will judge the sins of his and their enemies.

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision. Verse 14 says, Multitudes of enemies presumably. For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.

So often, when this final judgment is described, the day of the Lord is described in the scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testaments.

It's described in terms of a sort of cosmic convulsion. And that's what we find in the next verse, verse 15. The sun and the moon are darkened. The stars withdraw their shining.

[16 : 40] Same sort of language we saw at the end of chapter 2 as well. The portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun turned to darkness.

The moon to blood. Before the great and terrible day of the Lord. And the same sort of language used in other places, not least in the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible. Because this is telling us that the end of history will be a terrifying time.

The last battle, Armageddon, the old heaven, the old earth, wrapped up and passing away. There will be a time when this whole universe, in a sense, will shake a cosmic cataclysm.

Because God's judgment is so fierce. Fair but fierce. Overthrowing this old world. And even though mountains shake and tremble, who will stand on that day?

Well, verse 16 goes on to say that the Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem and the heavens and the earth shake. God's doing. But the Lord is a refuge for his people.

[17 : 47] A stronghold for the people of Israel. Terrifying though that day will be. The Lord is a refuge.

It's hard to imagine, for me anyway, people's fear at an earthquake. Or a bushfire. Or a volcano erupting. The panic and fleeing.

Where do you go that's safe? On that day, God says, He is the refuge. He is the stronghold. Come to him.

Is what he's implying. Now this is not the triumph of the good over the bad. God is not saying his people are the goody goodies. The ones who've been great and good and nice and noble in their society.

The good citizens. That's not at all what he's saying. Because remember who his people are. His people are sinful people. His people are ones whose sins brought about the locust plague, the drought and the fire as punishment from God.

[18 : 49] So why is God now a refuge and a stronghold for his people? Because they've turned to him for mercy. Remember that's what we saw back in chapter 2.

In verse 17. Spare your people, O Lord. In chapter 2, verse 18. The Lord had pity on his people. You see, the only reason why God is a refuge to anyone is because he extends mercy to them.

And his people are those who've received mercy. That is, his people are those who've asked for mercy. It's not a simple separation of good and bad.

Because there'd be no one in the good part. No one is good, not even one, the scriptures say. But it's a separation of those who receive mercy and those who shun it.

Mercy from God alone is the refuge from his judgment on that final day. The only one who survives judgment day will be the person who receives God's mercy.

[19 : 59] The only one who stands on that day will be the person who is forgiven. For no one is good. Now it's easy to cry out against the injustice of our world and so we should.

But it's easy to do it self-righteously and that we shouldn't. None of us is righteous other than by the mercy of God.

One day God is coming to judge the living and the dead. And who will stand? Only by the grace of God, by his mercy to forgive us, will anyone stand on that day.

But for such people, he is a sure and certain refuge and stronghold. On that day his city will stand supreme.

Zion, Jerusalem. So you shall know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy mountain, verse 17 says. And Jerusalem shall be holy and strangers shall never again pass through it.

[21 : 06] Not the earthly Jerusalem, subject today as it is to suicide bombers and others, but the new Jerusalem. The one that we're told later on will come down out of heaven, adorned as a bride prepared for her husband.

That's the vision of the end of the Bible. It's consistent with what we see in Joel. It's consistent with what we see throughout the scriptures. That the new Jerusalem will last forever.

It's God's city. He makes it, he prepares it, and he sends it to us. And it's a city where those who dwell within it know God directly. Holy. That's what verse 17 began by saying.

You shall know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion. What does the end of the Bible show us? The new Jerusalem where God dwells there. There is no temple because God is the temple. And those who live there know God.

Those who are there will be holy. And that's what Joel tells us here. Jerusalem shall be holy. It's the holy city. It's all at the end of the Bible in more detail. But it's all here in Joel 3 as well.

[22 : 06] Not only will God offer protection on that day, but also prosperity. So verse 18 says that in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water.

A fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord, and water the Wadi Shittim. The drought's gone, you see. The locusts are gone. The fire's gone. The parched land, it's all gone.

It's now fertile. With sweet wine and milk and water. There's echoes here of the Garden of Eden with the river of life flowing through it to water the trees.

There's echoes here of the promised land that was flowing with milk and honey. There's echoes here of other prophets who prophesy that glorious Jerusalem of eternity with the river of life flowing through it, such as at the end of the prophet Ezekiel.

It's a foreshadowing of Jesus who promised to pour out life-giving water, talking about his Holy Spirit, whose giving we commemorate today, the day of Pentecost. It foreshadows again the end of the Bible, the new Jerusalem with the river of life flowing through it, watering everything around about.

[23 : 14] It's a glorious picture and a glorious hope. The enemies shall be defeated. It goes on to say in verse 19, Egypt and Edom mention this time traditional enemies of Israel because of the violence they did to God's people.

And Judah shall be inhabited forever and Jerusalem to all generations. This is not a temporary city being described. It's the eternal Jerusalem. Verse 20. And the climax of it all, as indeed it is in the book of Revelation as well, I will avenge their blood and I will not clear the guilty.

Revelation's new city is not open for all either. For the Lord dwells in Zion. So the most glorious promise of all is that God dwells with his people.

It's been God's goal through the Bible to dwell with his people without any hindrance or any barrier. He's there in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve but that dwelling with his people is fractured by human sin.

And so the glorious description to say that the Lord dwells in Zion implicit with all his people who will be part of that place is to say that sin is no more. Evil is no more. The book of Revelation spells it out in a bit more detail but it's all here in Joel implicitly at least.

[24 : 32] There's a glorious hope where there is no more evil or sin therefore no more injustice no more suffering no more pain all gone. And who's it for?

Not the good. There is none. But for those who receive mercy as we saw in chapter 2. What a reassuring picture this is for the people of God who seem to be suffering so much partly by their own doing partly by the evil of the nations around about.

When is this going to happen? When is this day of the Lord? Well as we saw in chapter 2 there's a sense in which the day of the Lord has come. For the promise that on this day God will pour out his spirit is already being fulfilled in part.

On the day of Pentecost when the spirit was poured out on God's people and they started preaching the gospel. A power of the spirit that derives from the power of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. For there on the cross Jesus overthrew the enemies of God and the enemies of God's people.

There Satan was defeated when Jesus died on the cross. There his victory was won and there when he rose from the dead his victory was made evident for all to see. But as the Bible makes clear we live not only in the light of that day of the Lord but we actually live in a sense in the middle of the day of the Lord.

[25 : 54] For the day of the Lord is not yet complete. Not everything about the day of the Lord prophesied in the Old Testament is yet complete. Jesus has won the victory on the cross a victory made evident by his resurrection.

The spirit has been poured out on all of God's people but the day of judgment when the nations will be gathered around the throne of God for judgment we yet await. For Jesus is coming again.

He's coming again to judge the living and the dead. When every person who's ever lived in every place in every age will be brought before the judgment throne of God and be accountable for their sins. And who will stand on that day?

Those who've asked for mercy. Those who've asked for forgiveness. For them and them alone God is a refuge and God is a stronghold.

On the day when Jesus returns the day of the Lord will be complete. The new Jerusalem will arrive and those who've received mercy will be ushered in for eternity.

[27 : 02] So we pray come Jesus come come to end the injustice come to end the suffering come to overthrow and gather up your enemies to the eternal fire come to vindicate your people.

We pray come Lord Jesus come not with self-righteousness but with repentance. Come Lord Jesus that the forgiveness you give us by dying for us will bring us to your heaven forever.

Come Lord Jesus ourselves. Watch out.

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