

Gather the Harvest!

I. The LORD is ready to judge

II. The LORD is ready to be your refuge

¹² ‘Let the nations be roused; let them advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the nations on every side. ¹³ Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow— so great is their wickedness!’ ¹⁴ Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. ¹⁵ The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. ¹⁶ The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the sky will tremble. But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

When the United States declared war on Japan, Germany in December of 1941 and Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria in June of 1942, the Senate and House approved the declaration with unanimous votes (with the exception of one vote against in the House regarding Japan). The enemy was obvious. The rationale given to go to war was communicated clearly. The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and Hitler and Mussolini had declared war on America. When Congress authorized the use of force in Afghanistan, it was communicated that the Taliban had provided safe haven for the terrorist group al-Qaeda who orchestrated the attack on our nation’s soil in 2001; a clear objective. With the war in Iraq, there are many theories as to why our troops are in that country. You may even have your own ideas. However, it is neither my place to speculate nor to judge the motives of the hearts of people.

My point is, sometimes there are clear cut and other times ambiguous reasons given for war. However, the LORD, in the Old Testament, opens his heart and reveals his purpose for going to war. When the army of Israel invaded Canaan, the LORD told commander Joshua, “Wipe these people from the face of the earth.” The enemy was godless and participated in gross idol worship practices. The LORD did not want his people exposed nor influenced by these heathens. The LORD wanted a pure nation; a clear objective.

In our lesson this morning from Joel, we get a glimpse of the Last Day, Armageddon, the final battle between God and his forces of righteousness against Satan and his forces of evil and unbelievers. In the verses preceding our lesson the LORD calls upon the nations of the earth to prepare for war. Gather your mighty warriors. Pick up your swords and spears. Assemble together. In vs12 he says, **“Let the nations be roused.”** Since we are talking about the Last and Final Day on the earth, Joel is talking about the resurrection of all people from the dead. In John 5:28,29 Jesus himself said, **“A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.”**

Joel describes this gathering on the Last Day as a harvest. Harvest time is typically a fun time for families; bonfires, hay rides, picking pumpkins and apples, walking through piles of leaves. This harvest is not described as a fun time. **“Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.”** A sickle is a long, curved blade on the end of a long handle, which a harvester uses to cut down his crop. From the Gospel this morning we learned that the LORD is talking to his angels. On the Last Day his messengers will gather the harvest. The LORD tells us when he will send his harvesters, **“The winepress is full, the vats overflow, the harvest is ready.”** The time is more than ready for harvest because, **“So great is their wickedness.”** The apostle Paul wrote, **“There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”** (2Tim 3:2) It’s as if Paul read the headlines from last week’s newspaper.

Homosexual marriages are now recognized as legal in the state of California. People are slapping God in the face and saying, "We don't want to abide by your principles of marriage." This past week witnesses were convicted in the Burke murder trial. These individuals lied as to the whereabouts of the accused the night his wife and step mother were murdered in their home in Rineyville. The LORD God says, "Enough! It is time to put an end to this wickedness. Gather them all together!"

All nations will gather at the Valley of Jehoshaphat. This is a symbolic name given to an actual valley close to Jerusalem in Palestine. King Jehoshaphat witnessed a great victory by the hand of the LORD in that valley. One day the king was in his palace and a messenger rushed in and told the king of Judah that a vast army was approaching from the southwest. Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah fasted and approached the LORD in earnest prayer regarding this matter. The LORD sent them out to battle. As they marched out for battle the soldiers sang, "Give thanks to the LORD, for his loves endures forever." The LORD threw the enemy armies into confusion and they annihilated each other. When the army of Judah came to the valley they looked down the saw that their enemies were all dead. (2Chronicles 20:1-30)

What a fitting name for a place where unbelievers will be summoned on Last Day, a place of victory for the LORD. In Psalm 2 the LORD asks why the nations even bother to try and rise up against the LORD. Because here's what's going to happen... First of all, the name is significant. *Jehoshaphat* in the Hebrew language means *the LORD judges*. In vs14 the prophet Joel calls the valley **the valley of decision**. A decision will be made all right, just not by any human being. There are no second chances on the Last Day. The Judge will make a decision, and his verdict will be final. The Judge's voice will cause those gathered to tremble in fear. "**The LORD will roar from Zion, and thunder from Jerusalem.**" (vs14) The Hebrew word *roar* refers to a lion's roar. You've been the zoo before, and watched lions from behind the safety of thick glass or bars. The third season of the reality show Survivor took place on location in Africa. The tribe of contestants camped in the bush country of Kenya. The camp was surrounded by thorny bushes, intertwined and piled high. At night the survivors could hear the lions growling as they circled their camp. That's a scary situation. How much more frightening to hear the Lion roar in anger from heaven? Or to hear his voice like thunder, like the thunder from the storm clouds we heard last week here in Kentucky? What's even more frightening is what he says, "**Come, trample the grapes.**" After grapes were harvested they were thrown into a large winepress hewn out of stone, where slaves would trample the grapes with their feet. The juice ran into a trough and down into a large vat. Revelation 14 tells us that after the angels gathered their harvest they threw the grapes in the great winepress of God's wrath. The grapes were trampled and blood ran out. Trampling of grapes is a biblical picture of divine execution.

The Last Day is a terrifying picture. No wonder Jesus said that when those who do not believe in him see the Last Day approaching they will cry out for the mountains to fall on them and the hills to cover them (Luke 23:28-31). They do not want to stand before the Judge. That's not the nice, loving compassionate God we hear about in Bible, is it? Why does he reveal these truths to us? The LORD wants the world to know that he is serious about the wickedness of humankind. He does not take sin and impenitence lightly. The Last Day can be a terrifying thought even to believers. You and I are well aware that we are not perfect. You and I commit the same sins as those who do not believe in Jesus. At times we regard gathering for public worship and Bible study as optional, just like unbelievers. At times we find ourselves using God's name to curse and swear, just like they do. At times we are focused on our possessions and money and nothing else, just like they do. And because we act, think and speak, just like unbelievers, the Last Day can be very terrifying.

But the LORD offers words of comfort for you, dear Christian, from his prophet Joel. You will not fear the Last Day because the LORD, the God of promise, says to you, "**But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.**" You are the LORD's people. You became his at your baptism. It was at your baptism that he washed away your sins, yes, even the sins you commit just like the unbelievers. It was at your baptism that the Holy Spirit applied the Judge's decree, "You are not guilty." It

was at your baptism that the Lord Jesus rescued you from being trampled in God's winepress of wrath and grafted you as a branch into the Vine. It was at your baptism that Jesus became your refuge and your stronghold.

These two Hebrew words for *refuge* and *stronghold* are the same that King David used in the Psalms. You remember that before he became king of Israel, King Saul and his forces pursued David and his men all over the Judean countryside. David and his men often found protection and safety in the caves and natural rocky fortresses. When he wrote his songs David talked about safety in the rocks and fortresses. He wasn't talking about geography. He recognized that the LORD was his rock and fortress. In the same way today's soldier knows that he or she is protected from enemy fire by their Interceptor body armor or an armor plated Humvees. They know their real protection and shelter is from the LORD, their refuge and rock.

For the final hymn today we will sing, "*Rock of ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.*" At your baptism you were hidden in the Rock, Jesus himself. He will be your protection on the Last Day. On the Last Day, the LORD will judge you. But he will judge you based on Christ, in whose name you were baptized, by whose blood your sins are covered. The roar of the angry lion will not alarm you. The thunder of his voice will not scare you. For that voice of wrath screamed at him as he hung on the cross in your place. He will quietly say to you, "Come, to the kingdom I have prepared for you." The angels will not summon you to the Valley of Jehoshaphat for war. They will escort you to your home in heaven. You are safe in Christ. He is your rock and your refuge.

You probably know someone who is unsure about what the Last Day will bring for them. You probably know many people like this. You care enough about that friend, coworker or relative to share with them what you've learned this morning. The LORD will judge. He is serious about sin. He is serious about being a refuge to those who repent, and who believe and put their trust in him for salvation.

We do not always understand why nations go to war. But today we pray to our LORD that he will resolve the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Until he does, we ask that he protect those who fight on our behalf, to give them victory over our enemies until they are defeated. We also pray that he brings the final day of war soon, the Last Day, to do what he promised, to declare victory over his enemies, to destroy all wickedness, and bring us, who have found our refuge in Christ, home to be with him. So we eagerly pray, "Come quickly Lord Jesus! Amen!"