

Lake Cities Community Church
March 14, 2010
Book of Joel
Pastor Craig Schill

“Let Justice Roll Down”
Joel 3:1-21

We are talking this morning about God’s justice. And as I thought about this topic and our passage - I thought of police officers. Police have a very unique job in that they are continually focused on the law, crime, punishment and justice. And so I approached the City to ask if I could interview an officer about our topic today from their perspective. They graciously agreed and I invite you to watch now this video – it is about 7 minutes long.

TEXT / PREVIEW

I want you to think about officer Bell’s words as we turn now to Joel chapter 3. In chapters one and two, God’s message of judgment has fallen on God’s people, and the call has been to repent and enjoy restoration, or continue the same way and face God’s punishment. Now, in chapter three, God turns his attention to warn the surround nations.

We don’t have time to go verse by verse through this long passage, so I have broken it into topics – first what **charges** does God bring against the nations? Second, what **punishment** is proposed? And last, we will consider God’s **motivation** for his actions. So, (1) Charges, (2) punishment and (4) motivation.

CHARGES

Let begin with charges. First, here is Jerusalem on the map. And God is passing judgment on the people of the surrounding nations. Some are listed by name: Tyre, Sidon,

and the regions of Philistia (verse 4) and Egypt and Edom (verse 19). These groups used their proximity to harass and bully the Jews. Here are the charges.

First, they have scattered God's people among the nations (verse 2) – and second they have divided up the land. These are military strategies to decimate a culture. It is like what our country did, at times, to the Native Americans. The “Trail of Tears” is the name given to the forced relocation of the Navajo people – who were forced to walk 300 miles in 18 days from Arizona to New Mexico to their new reservation. Relocation had the purpose of reducing military threats by destroying cultural identity and giving the original homeland to others.

Third charge: “They have also cast lots for My people”, fourth, they gave “(they have) traded a boy for a harlot,” and fifth, “(they have) sold a girl for wine that they may drink” (all in verse 3). These charges show the surrounding nation’s cheap value of human life – where people were traded like commodities. Children are sold for sex or alcohol. These are heinous crimes.

Charge number six: “you have taken my silver and my gold.” Seven, “(and) brought My precious treasures to your temples.” Remember that Israel, under David and Solomon had grown incredibly wealthy. The tribe of Judah was like Park Cities– Houses were full of treasures – and God’s temple full of tons of silver and gold. The surrounding nations made war on Israel and plundered their treasures. What they didn’t realize is that the silver and gold actually belonged to the one true God, who was not happy about it being used to honor false gods.

Charge eight, (verse 6) “you sold the sons of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their territory.” Here the people are sold into slavery -

another strategy to destroy God's people by scattering them. Ninth charge, verse 13, a summary statement, "their wickedness is great" not minimal or average, but significant evil. Number 10, verse 19, there has been great "violence done to the sons of Judah" and eleven "they have shed innocent blood."

So God through His prophet has laid serious charges at the surrounding nations. They are guilty of slavery, child abuse, murder and robbery. And from these charges, I want us to not miss the theological lesson. This lesson is one we ought to keep always in our minds as we think about God. The lesson is this: "**God does not punish the innocent.**" God is perfectly just. He does not need DNA tests or forensic science to correctly identify the offenders and lay charges against them. Or to put it another way, when God punishes someone, you can be assured He has good reasons to do so.

PUNISHMENT

Which leads to our second point – God's punishment. Now most of the time, and this is true for our church, we hear about God's love, compassion and mercy (rightly so), and so sometimes we have a difficult time processing a God who punishes. But let me reiterate a point I made a few weeks ago – that God's anger at sin is just as much of a perfect attribute as is His love and mercy. And would you really want a God who did not get angry about the kinds of crimes our passage describes - child abuse? Slavery? The murder of innocent people? Because God is good and just, he ensures that sin does not go unpunished.

Therefore... verse two: I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into Judgment with them there. God gathers the nations to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. What is that, or where is that? Jehoshaphat was a King

of Judah, and He experienced God's victory over his enemies, but I don't think that is the reference here. Jehoshaphat means (in Hebrew) "The Lord Judges." And a valley in the Old Testament is often used symbolically of a place of judgment or warfare. The valley is not where you want to be in the OT – "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." So the Valley of Jehoshaphat is probably not a geographical location, but a phrase to denote a place of God's judgment. As God judged the nations, that judgment occurred in many different locations. But judge He will.

God summarizes the punishment in verse four: "But if you do recompense me, swiftly and speedily I will return your recompense on your head." In other words – whatever evil you did (paid) to my people, I will repay you for the same amount. You sold my people to scatter them throughout the world, verse, eight, "Also I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the sons of Judah, and they will sell them to the Sabeans, to a distant nation," What you did to abuse my people, I will turn that same punishment upon you. You did violence and shed blood among my people, verse 21, "I will avenge their blood which I have not avenged." You made war on Israel, OK, I will bring war to you, verse 9, "Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare a war; rouse the mighty men! Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up."

This may seem harsh to our sensibilities; but the standard for punishment in the Old Testament was what? (Exodus 21) – "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, life for a life..." And, even though we don't follow that today, the purpose of this law was to ensure that the punishment *fit* the crime. I don't know if you ever thought about it that way. One of my professors in seminary Dr. Thomas Constable said, "God intended the "eye for eye" provision to limit punishment rather than giving free reign to it. For example, a man might kill the person

who beat up his brother (cf. Gen. 4:23). God forbade such excessive vengeance among His people and limited them so that they should only exact equal payment for offenses committed against them and no more.”

This is what God is going to model against the offending nations; equal payment for offenses. Remember, what is being described here is not God’s grace or mercy, but His justice applied in punishment. What is the theological principle we take from this? It is simply this: **God’s punishment is fair.** God’s punishment is not soft and wimpy; but neither is it too harsh or excessive. It is just right. God ensure the punishment fits the crime. **God’s punishment is fair.**

MOTIVATION

Now, lastly, what is motivating God’s actions in our passage? Certainly his justice is at work, but (interestingly) that is not what is emphasized. Look at verse two. God is acting **verse two, “on behalf of my people and My inheritance, Israel.”** The picture here is that of a father protecting his children. His most precious possessions (inheritance). Like Officer Bell said, when someone messes with your children – it makes you particularly motivated to do something about it. God is motivated not only out of a cold justice, but from warm relationships. And He is going to protect his own: **verse 16, “The Lord is a refuge for His people, and a stronghold for the sons of Israel.”** *“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.”* God is acting as an advocate for his people. The theological lesson is that **God takes care of His own.** He protects and avenges those who align themselves with him.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were being bullied and abused by someone and you wish you had someone to protect you? When I was a Sophomore in

college at the University of Arizona another student named Bill, who lived on the same floor, hated me. He literally hated me. I had never had someone hate me like that before or since. One reason, I believe, was because he found out I was a Christian; and he was a strong atheist. The hatred was not just philosophical, but became physical. Once Bill punched me in the stomach. When I would pass him in the hallway of the dorm, he would intentionally ram me into the walls. I can remember on one occasion, when I was in my room studying, he came and pounded on my door, over and over for minutes, intimidating me. And it worked. I was young, timid and did not know how to respond or deal with this anger and abuse. But there was another guy on our floor, named Tom. Tom was the most popular guy in the dorm. He was tall, handsome, muscular and a senior. He has the best stereo and the coolest room. Everyone hung out in Tom's room. And when Tom heard about my troubles, he called me into his room and he said, "Craig, I'm going to take care of you – if Bill gives you any more trouble, you let me know and I will take care of him." I will never forget that, and I remember it as if it were yesterday. I never had anymore trouble from Bill.

And that is what God is doing for His people. His children. He is saying – "I've got your back. I know you have suffered abuse at the hands of these rouse nations – but I will take care of you. I have you covered." **God takes care of His own.**

SUMMARY: We have seen from our passage today - regarding the charges; God does not punish the innocent. We have seen from the punishment – that His punishment is fair, and from his motivation, that God takes care of His own.

TWO CLOSING STORIES

I'm going to close with two stories to move us toward application. These stories both took place, again, when I was in college at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and both had to do with the police.

First, also in my dorm, we had some traditional pranks that everyone would participate in – one was stealing a large billboard that was set on a flatbed trailer, and moving it from its location on the mall, to set it in front of the girl's dorm. It was foolish and dangerous and, when the police arrived with sirens screaming, we discovered it was also probably against the law. The bullhorn said, "Stop right there!" And in contrast to that instruction, someone in our group yelled, "Run!" Now, I don't have time to finish the rest of this story, but one lesson I learned is that if a police officer tells you to "stop" – don't run away from them. That is not the path of wisdom, as we all found out.

Often you and I are like the surrounding nations. God has caught us red handed, doing things we ought not to be doing. The charges laid against us are accurate and unavoidable. Here is the application – If God is telling you to stop. Don't run away from Him. Don't try to hide or cover-up; just put your hand up, confess and repent of your sins. You don't want to find yourself on the wrong side of God's judgment. You don't want to run from God. Ok... what happened is that all of us college kids were rounded up by the police – and we did not receive justice that night, but mercy – we were not arrested but lectured and as a dorm we were grounded for the next two weeks. And if you put your faith in Jesus, you find - not justice but mercy and grace.

Here is the second story. That same year, a group of five or six of us went out to see a play in Tucson's art district. We went out for a little culture. But the problem is that when

our play was over, it was also the same time the hockey arena let out, which was just next door. I don't have anything against hockey fans, but these fans were drunk and rowdy. While we were walking down the ramp to the parking lot, a group of belligerent, loud hockey fans fell in behind us, and I knew that there was going to be trouble – you know how sometimes you just sense things are not going to turn out well? And then they ran through us, and the biggest of the trouble makers, smacked this little guy (don't remember his name) -- the weakest of our group in the jaw – knocking his glasses off his head and sending him to the ground where he cracked his head on the pavement. And as blood pooled around his head, he immediately went unconscious. Then it started to rain. I was so angry at those men, for the senseless violence they brought to our group. But I did not have the resource to bring them to justice, or make things right, or even to get help. And I was never so glad as when somehow police showed up to help us. They got our friend the medical attention he needed; they caught the bad guys and brought them to justice.

Here is the point – in the first story, the police were unwelcomed and represented a threat and judgment to us; in the second story; the police became our advocate and helper. And just as you don't want to find yourself on the wrong side of the law – you don't want to find yourself on the wrong side of God's justice. Don't put yourself in a position where God's justice works against you – but where it works for you.

If you are running from God, it is time to stop, surrender and confess your sins to Him. To return to Him. He will forgive you. Because the Bible tells us that anyone who comes to God, by faith, through the work of Jesus Christ, will not be treated as their sins deserve, but will be treated with grace and mercy; received as a son and daughter of God. Return to God and take refuge in Him.