

*Let the nations stir themselves up  
and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat;  
for there I will sit to judge  
all the surrounding nations.*

<sup>13</sup> *Put in the sickle,  
for the harvest is ripe.  
Go in, tread,  
for the winepress is full.  
The vats overflow,  
for their evil is great.*

<sup>14</sup> *Multitudes, multitudes,  
in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the LORD is near  
in the valley of decision.*

<sup>15</sup> *The sun and the moon are darkened,  
and the stars withdraw their shining.*

<sup>16</sup> *The LORD roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem,  
and the heavens and the earth quake.  
But the LORD is a refuge to his people,  
a stronghold to the people of Israel. (Joel 3:12-16 ESV)*

*“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.*

<sup>13</sup> *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!”*

<sup>14</sup> *Multitudes, multitudes  
in the valley of decision!  
For the day of the LORD is near  
in the valley of decision.*

<sup>15</sup> *The sun and moon will be darkened,  
and the stars no longer shine.*

<sup>16</sup> *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. (Joel 3:12-16 NIV 1984)*

### **What do you Need to Know about Judgment Day?**

Do you like thinking about Judgment Day? Sometimes we Lutherans seem to be a little uncomfortable with this teaching. When I was in the army twenty-five years ago, a sergeant who knew me pretty well made told a new captain in our battalion: “He’s a Bible banger, ma’am.” Now, as I recall we weren’t talking about Judgment Day, but I wonder if sometimes we Lutherans are uncomfortable with this subject because so many

Christians who do talk about it seem to be people that we might call “Bible bangers.” Or maybe there are other reasons. Perhaps we associate this teaching with earthquakes and wars and famines and there’s enough bad stuff going on in the world without taking time to think about the end of the world.

But God wants us to understand this teaching. It’s in the Bible for a reason. Today, in the prophet Joel, we have one of the oldest descriptions of Judgment Day in all of Scripture. Now, Judgment Day was always a part of what God’s people believed. But God didn’t give the whole Bible all at once. Almost 1600 years passed between the writing of Genesis and the writing of Revelation. In between, God used Joel to write down a description of what the Last Judgment would be like. He records the most essential details that God’s people of every age need to know. So, **what do you need to know about Judgment Day?**

### I.

**It’s near.** That’s Joel’s central point. Now, Joel wrote more than 800 years before Jesus was born. So this prophecy is more than 2,800 years old today. Maybe it doesn’t seem to us like it was so near, at least not when Joel wrote it. But God called all nations to sit up and take notice because he was going to bring them into the Valley of Jehoshaphat and he says, **“There I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.”**

What is the Valley of Jehoshaphat? It’s one of the valleys next to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built on a group of low mountain peaks. The Valley of Jehoshaphat runs along the east side of the ancient city. Many Jewish and Christian people believe that Joel is saying that the final judgment will literally take place in this valley next to Jerusalem. That may be true, but this seems more to be a poetic device. You see, Jehoshaphat was a king who lived a few decades before this prophecy was written. God had used him to win a great victory over the enemies of Israel, so the Valley of Jehoshaphat would remind Jewish readers of that judgment from God on his foreign enemies. But even more to the point, the name Jehoshaphat means “The LORD judges.” The Valley of the Jehoshaphat is a poetic way of saying, “the place where God will judge.”

On Judgment Day, God will gather all nations, the living and the dead. That truth is not a parable or a nice story. It’s not something only a Bible banger would believe. The Last Judgment is an essential part of the work of Christ. Why? The next verse tells us: **“Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.”** What is God talking about? The evil in the world. To make wine, you have to squeeze the juice out of grapes. For the people of Israel, that was the number one thing you got from your grapes. It was the payoff for all the months of tending and caring for those vines. Well, God uses that as an image of the payoff for all the evil in the world. Evil has reached its full measure and now God is going to judge the world.

Of course, Judgment Day has not arrived yet. So that means that we live in the era when evil is still growing and producing the fruit for which God will judge it. And that explains a lot about our lives. Believers and unbelievers live together in one world. God does not rip out evil and unbelief right now. He lets both continue because that’s the best thing for him to do. Sometimes people ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” It just doesn’t seem fair. But we live in a world where evil is running rampant because we live in a world that has not yet faced the final judgment. We live in a world in which God’s number one goal is to bring in all the elect, all the people that he is going to give faith. Until the last believer comes to faith, evil has to have the upper hand. But once God’s work is finished, then Jesus will return and the Judgment will begin.

And the Holy Spirit led Joel to proclaim, **“For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.”** Did God know when Joel wrote this that almost 3000 years would pass before we would read these words, and still the judgment would not have come? Of course he did. Still he said the judgment was “near.” Was God lying? No. But God does not count time like we do. The Bible says that to God, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day. From his perspective, the Last Day was close, even then. And it still is. One of the difficulties we face is thinking that Judgment Day is still a long ways off. Because God said it was near thousands of years ago, we often treat it like it’s still thousands of years away. And it could be. But God doesn’t want us to adopt that attitude. He wants us to live every day like it could be today – because it could!

If you knew that Jesus was going to return today, what would be different about your life? Don’t you think that would add a sense of urgency about your faith? Don’t you think you’d work harder to resist temptations because you wouldn’t want Jesus to show up when you were in the middle of some sin that you give in to over and over again? Don’t you think that you’d make sure that you had your faith in order because today you were going to go to heaven or hell? But if you assume that you’re not going to see God today, then it’s a whole lot easier to let things ride. You don’t outright deny your faith, but it’s easier to give in to sin,

because you've got time to make things right later. You can skip church, you can let your faith coast for awhile because there are going to be more opportunities. You can put other responsibilities and other pleasures first and get to God when it's more convenient.

All that is sin. God commands us to put him first, to repent of our sins, to have a sense of urgency about our faith. It's just sin that doesn't want to deal with God right now. Joel makes it clear that Jesus could come back at any moment. Do we want to be caught with our faith in disarray when he comes? What would we deserve if that happened? We would deserve hell. We would deserve the terrors that God warns of so often. God forbid that we should ever fall under that judgment!

What's going to save us from that judgment? Jesus. Jesus is what makes it possible for us even to talk about Judgment Day without getting a pit in our stomach, because Jesus has paid for all our sin and inattention. Jesus has paid for all the times we put something else first and let our faith slide. Jesus has paid for the lack of urgency that we feel about our faith – for our assumption that there's always going to be more time, for our failure to take God seriously when he says that he is coming soon. Jesus went to the cross and when his Father abandoned him there, Jesus suffered hell itself for us. Then Jesus died because death and hell are what we all deserve for a faith that just doesn't have that sense of urgency. He paid the full boat for you and for me – indeed for every sinner who will ever live. Then he rose to say to you and to me and to all people that it's over. Death and hell are beaten. We will go to heaven when we die. We will rise, if we're already dead when Jesus comes. Dead or alive, when Jesus comes, we will enter eternal life and live for endless ages in joy with him. That's what we need to know about Judgment Day.

## II.

Judgment Day is coming, and soon. But sometimes, we Christians are uncomfortable with that teaching. It doesn't sound very modern. In fact, it often sounds like a big scare tactic. And most Americans think that churches aren't supposed to make you feel scared. There just seems to be something wrong with anyone who believes that God uses fear. Well, God does use fear. He wants us to be afraid of judgment. But that's only the beginning of the story. If your understanding of Judgment Day ends with fear, then you haven't understood what makes Christianity unique – indeed you haven't understood the heart of our faith. **What do you need to know about Judgment Day? It's not scary for us!**

Quite often, the Old Testament is scary when it talks about God judging the world. The Old Testament prophets hammer away at Israel. The New Testament doesn't do that nearly as much. Why is that? Is it because the Old Testament was a religion of fear while the New Testament is a religion of love? No. The Old and the New Testaments present the same God, the same Judgment and the same way to heaven. The difference is the audience. Most of the time, the prophets were talking at least in part to people who weren't listening to God anymore. That's not always true and there are some beautiful gospel passages about Judgment Day in the Old Testament. But quite often it's true. Most of the time, the New Testament is directed to believers who are trying to hang on to their faith in a world that attacks and persecutes them. So most of the time, the New Testament presents Judgment Day as the final rescue.

But many passages in both the Old and the New Testament pick up where Joel leaves off. Joel says that the sun and moon will be darkened and the stars will no longer shine. Several other prophets and the Lord himself say the same thing. Of course they're reminding us that at creation, God set those lights in the sky. Joel says, **“The LORD roars from Zion.”** Other passages speak of the voice of an archangel, of the heavens disappearing with a roar, of a trumpet blast from heaven. Clearly, the end of the world will be deafening. Joel says that the heavens and the earth will be shaken. Again, both the Old and New Testaments repeat that statement many times. The world as we know it will come to an end. We will see it and feel it and hear it, if we're still alive then. What would you feel if you saw the sun stop shining? If you heard that trumpet blast and that voice of God and the heavens roaring? What would you feel if the earth beneath your feet would not stand still and the skies above your head were reeling? Don't you think you would be terrified? I do. And I think the signs of the end that Jesus talks about – wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines and persecutions – also cause us no small amount of terror.

But Joel says, **“But the LORD is a refuge to his people, a stronghold to the people of Israel.”** God's people will be safe on that day of terror. We Christians are God's people. We have a refuge. We have a stronghold. That's true already today. In all the things that happen before our Lord returns, Jesus will protect us. When we die, Jesus will keep us safe – strange as that may sound! God will preserve our souls through our

faith in Christ and he will bring us home to heaven. And if we live to feel the earth shake and see the heavens reel, if we live to hear all that roaring and commotion, if we live to see the sun and moon darkened, God will carry us through the terror to eternal life on the other side. That is his promise. Because he promised, we will live with Jesus forever.

That's what we need to know about Judgment Day. The Bible does tell us more and it's worth learning more about. But even if you study everything the Bible says about Judgment Day, all your questions will not be answered. When I was in the army all those years ago, I dealt with classified documents. From the first moment I began to work with that material, the military emphasized the concept of the need to know. You would not be told any more than you needed to know to do your job. Well, God does not tell us everything about Judgment Day. He tells us what we need to know to preserve our faith and reach eternal life. What do we need to know? Judgment Day is real and it is coming soon. No matter how much time has gone by, it could be today and we need to be ready. And when it comes, it holds no terrors for us who trust in Jesus, because it's the beginning of our eternal life with Jesus. Amen.