

# Joel 3:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/joel/joel-3/joel-31-3/>

*When the LORD restores the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, He will judge the Gentile nations for the way they treated His covenant people.*

Joel 3 (Chapter 4 in the Hebrew Bible) continues to describe future events far beyond the immediate Babylonian invasion. This makes clear that the devastation Israel is about to endure will not eliminate Israel. His holy nation will ultimately prevail.

Joel 3 describes a final battle in which the Suzerain God will assemble the Gentile nations for judgment and restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem. The LORD began with the theme of restoration and introduced it with the phrase *For behold*. The particle *behold* is often used to describe an event that is about to take place. It serves to focus attention on the statement that follows it. The speaker uses the term *behold* to focus on an event that may be surprising for his listeners.

The unexpected event may be immediate or urgent. For instance, the LORD said to the prophet Ezekiel: “Son of man, *behold*, I am about to take from you the desire of your eyes with a blow...” (Ezekiel 24:16). In this case the startling event was the death of Ezekiel’s wife that very evening. On the other hand, the particle *behold* may be used to describe an event that is distant, as in the case here in Joel. In either case, it tells the reader that something important and dramatic will happen.

The particle *behold* is followed by the phrase *in those days and at that time*. This formula links the events to the time in which the LORD will “pour out” His “Spirit” on all the inhabitants of Judah (Joel 2:28-29). This pouring out of God’s Spirit will occur in the end times, not in Joel’s day. The phrase serves to intensify the truth about what God will do. Stated differently, in the future, the LORD will not only “pour out” His “Spirit” on Judah, but He will also *restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem*.

To *restore the fortunes* is literally to “turn the turning,” that is, to restore one to well-being. It implies a reversal of misfortune. That means that *Jerusalem and Judah* will gain what they lost during the four locust invasions that represent invasions by Gentile nations (Joel 1:4). God will *restore* fertility to Judah’s fields and compensate His people for their loss (Joel 2:21-27).

The restoration of God’s chosen people is blended with the judgment of the Gentile nations. The LORD declared, *I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat*. The name *Jehoshaphat* means “Yahweh will judge,” and so fits the context well. The *valley* is called “the valley of decision,” alluding to the place of God’s final verdict on the Gentile nations (Joel 3:12-14).

There does not seem to be a consensus on which valley is referred to by Joel. The Bible does not appear to refer to a *valley* called *Jehoshaphat*. Some identify it with the Kidron Valley, east of

Jerusalem, pointing to early Christian tradition, notably Jerome. Others prefer the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem. Regardless of the precise location of the *valley*, it can be understood in terms of its meaning. Either of these would refer to a *valley* near Jerusalem, where the LORD *will enter into judgment with the Gentile nations*. In this case, *the valley of Jehoshaphat* serves as a play on words to describe what will take place there; *Jehoshaphat* means “Yahweh judges.”

The reason God will judge the Gentile *nations* is to avenge His chosen people: *On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel*. God says He will *restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem*, which speaks to the immediate audience addressed by Joel. It is likely that at the time of Joel’s prophecy, the northern kingdom of Israel no longer existed, having been defeated and taken into exile by the Assyrians. As God’s people and Jacob’s descendants, *Judah and Jerusalem* also bear the name *Israel*. That God also says He will *enter into judgement with the nations there On behalf of His people and His inheritance, Israel* likely means that at this time in the future all of Israel will be restored, not just Judah. The nation of Judah included two tribes, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. We know from other parts of scripture that all the tribes of Israel will be gathered back into the land in the end times (Amos 9:14-15; Revelation 7:1-8, Ezekiel 38:1-14).

The term “*people*” [“‘ām” in Hebrew] speaks of God’s covenant relationship with Judah. He called them *My people*, making it clear that they belong to Him. This covenant relationship sets Judah (and Israel) in a position of intimacy with God. This is why God refers to Israel as His children (Deuteronomy 1:3), His chosen (Deuteronomy 7:6), and His wife (Ezekiel 16:32). Israel was also appointed to serve a priestly function among the nations, to bring them to a knowledge of the Lord, and through that testimony come to God. Through Jesus, the son of David, the nations can be grafted in to the olive tree that is Israel and receive the great blessings of God’s covenant relationship (Romans 11:17, Ephesians 2:11-13).

Such a privilege is not based on any goodness or merit on their part. Instead, it is based on the LORD’s love and faithfulness (Deuteronomy 7:6-8; 9:4-6). Because God remains faithful to His promises, He will never “fail” or “forsake” His *people*. God is trustworthy.

God calls *Israel* his *inheritance*. The term *inheritance* [“naḥălâ” in Hebrew] refers to the portion of land possession that transfers to an heir upon the owner’s death (Num. 27:1-11). The term is used of inheriting land, not of inheriting movable possessions such as treasures or flocks of animals (Num. 36:2-9). A biblical heir is identified before the time of the actual property transfer. And once the heir is identified, the property is usually identified as well. According to the book of Proverbs, the *inheritance* is the gift of a good father to his children (Proverbs 13:22). By calling Israel His *inheritance*, God provides a picture of His love for Israel. Property owners do not despise their property, but care for, enjoy, and love their possessions. God considers Israel His *inheritance*. They are His covenant partner, and He is faithful to them. Therefore, He will judge the nations who despise and abuse His *inheritance*. In fact God considers Israel His firstborn, elevating the importance of Israel’s inheritance (Exodus 4:22).

The Suzerain God gave the land of Canaan to His covenant people as their inheritance (Deuteronomy 12:9). God granted the land to Abraham as a reward for obedience (Genesis

15:18). Verse 2 speaks of Israel as God's *inheritance* (Deuteronomy 32:9; Jeremiah 10:16). This shows that the people of Judah and Israel belong to God (Deuteronomy 32:9). He "guarded" them "as the pupil of His eye" (Deuteronomy 32:11). This prophecy says the LORD will one day judge the Gentile *nations* for their mistreatment of His chosen people.

The LORD then outlined some specific crimes for which the Gentile *nations* will be judged. *They have scattered Israel among the nations and divided up My land.* The verb *scatter* ["pāzar" in Hebrew] means "to disperse." It speaks of a military invasion. The Gentile *nations* invaded God's people and sent them into exile. They also divided up God's *land*, taking possession of it as if it belonged to them. This prophecy speaks in past tense, as though this has already taken place. At the time of Joel, the Babylonian exile was still in the future. But there would be four nations that would disperse Israel, like four kinds of locusts (Joel 1:4), beginning with Babylon. We now know that the Jews have lived in a dispersed state across the globe for generations, only beginning to return to their native land in 1948.

Furthermore, the LORD stated that the Gentile nations *have cast lots for My people.* In the ancient world, the casting of *lots* was a type of divination in which the random outcome was believed to reflect divine will. In the Bible, the practice was used in a variety of circumstances, including (1) the allocation of the tribal inheritance in the Promised Land (Numbers 26:55-56), (2) the order of the priests and their duties (1 Chronicles 24:5-19; Nehemiah 10:34), and (3) the determination of an offender (Joshua 7:14-18; Proverbs 18:18). In our passage, the casting of *lots* might have been done to decide who would get the Judean captives (Obadiah 1:11). The image is of the *people* of God being treated as property.

Not only did the Gentile nations *cast lots* for God's people, but they also sold their children into slavery. The text tells us that they *traded a boy for a harlot and sold a girl for wine that they may drink.* In ancient times, the slave trade was one of the most lucrative aspects of warfare and border raiding. Captives were sold to dealers, who would sell them, and perhaps transport them far from their homeland. The Gentile nations had no respect for God's people because they *traded* their children to pay the price for their debauchery. This illustration indicates that the Gentile nations attributed no real value to their Jewish captives. A drink of *wine* or an encounter with a *harlot* was considered to have greater value than a boy or girl. For this reason, the LORD will deal harshly with those nations when He restores His covenant people.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>1</sup>**“For behold, in those days and at that time,  
When I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem,  
<sup>2</sup>I will gather all the nations  
And bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat.  
Then I will enter into judgment with them there  
On behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel,  
Whom they have scattered among the nations;  
And they have divided up My land.  
<sup>3</sup>“They have also cast lots for My people,**

**Traded a boy for a harlot  
And sold a girl for wine that they may drink.**