

# Joel 3:4-8

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*The LORD turns His attention to the Phoenicians and the Philistines. He promises to judge them for the crimes they committed against Judah.*

The LORD, having described His great day of judgment on the Gentile nations, turned His attention to some specific crimes committed by two of them: the Phoenicians and the Philistines. He began with a conjunctive adverb *moreover* to add specific details about these nations. The adverb is followed by a question: *What are you to Me, O Tyre, Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia?*

The city named *Tyre* was on the Mediterranean coast north of Israel (modern-day Lebanon), while *Sidon* was about forty kilometers north of *Tyre* (Genesis 10:15; Josh. 11:8). They were notable city-states of Phoenicia in the early eighth century BC. In those days, the Phoenicians were known as slave traders. Amos made this clear in his oracle against Phoenicia when he stated that “they delivered up an entire population to Edom” (Amos 1:9).

The *regions of Philistia* comprise five important cities: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gaza, and Gath. Amos listed the first four of these cities in his indictment against the Philistines (Amos 1:6-8). These Philistine cities were located along the coast of what is the modern state of Israel. Throughout much of Old Testament history, the Philistines were Israel’s enemies, as evidenced in the books of Judges and 1 Samuel. The prophet Amos also tells us that the Philistines “deported an entire population to deliver it to Edom” (Amos 1:6). God was not pleased with them because they committed great atrocities against His covenant people.

Both Phoenicia and *Philistia* were Israel’s long-standing adversaries (Amos 1:6, 9; Isaiah 9:12; 14:28-32; 2 Chronicles 21:16–17). These nations treated God’s people so harshly that God asked them, *What are you to Me?* The LORD asked a follow-up question, *Are you rendering Me a recompense?* God makes clear that these nations are far past their ability to repay God for their abuses against His people. Judah and Israel are His chosen people, His inheritance (vv. 2-3) and God’s “firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22). Any crime committed against God’s people is ultimately against God. The nations were guilty. The LORD makes clear that any proposed reparation would be swiftly rejected: *But if you do recompense Me, swiftly and speedily I will return your recompense on your head.* God makes clear that no amount of reparation will be sufficient. Rather, God would judge them according to the level of their crimes.

This passage reminds us of God’s promises to Abraham in Genesis, where He stated, “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (Genesis 12:3). Simply put, whoever does good to God’s people will be rewarded with great blessings; whoever does wrong will be rewarded with God’s punishment. The Phoenicians and the Philistines did what was evil in God’s eyes. God will judge them severely. His judgment would not delay. It would come *swiftly and speedily*. When the judgement began, it would happen rapidly.

The LORD moved further to describe the specific crimes for which He would punish the Phoenicians and the Philistines. He stated, *You have taken My silver and My gold, brought My precious treasures to your temples*. Since the people of Judah belong to God, their wealth is also God's wealth. The Bible tells us that all earthly possessions belong to God: "The earth is the LORD's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). The Suzerain God was the one who gave all those possessions to Judah. He thus possessed the right to condemn the Phoenicians and the Philistines for stealing Judah's valuables.

In addition to looting Judah's wealth, the Phoenicians and the Philistines *sold the sons of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks*. The *sons of Judah and Jerusalem* refer to all the inhabitants of Judah. The Hebrew term translated as *Greek* is "Javan." It probably refers to the Greek name Ionia, the Greek region of the western coast of Turkey and the Aegean islands. These Ionian *Greeks* dwelt in this area just before the first millennium BC. The *Greeks* were actively involved in international trade. There is evidence of contact between them and the Assyrians by the eighth century BC.

The book of Ezekiel tells us that the Ionian *Greeks* were involved in slave trade with the Phoenicians: "With the lives of men and vessels of bronze they paid for your merchandise" (Ezek. 27:13). In our passage, the LORD states that the Phoenicians and the Philistines *sold the sons of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks*. They did so *in order to remove them far from their territory*, no doubt, for their economic benefits. Such a greedy act did not please the LORD. Therefore, He would not leave these nations unpunished.

God's justice will be applied measure for measure. He announced His course of actions using the particle *behold*, which draws attention to the importance of the message. Then He said, *I am going to arouse them from the place where you have sold them and return your recompense on your head*. The punishment properly fits the crime. The LORD will someday use the people of Judah as His instrument to judge the Phoenicians and the Philistines. He will inflict upon them the same sufferings they inflicted upon *the sons of Judah and Jerusalem*. God made that clear when He declared, *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*.

The *Sabeans* were from Sheba, present-day Yemen. This area was highly urbanized and had achieved a complex degree of civilization by this period. Their queen visited Solomon and brought him many trade articles as gifts (1 Kings 10:1-13). The inhabitants of Sheba were from a *distant* land and were very much involved in commercial activities (Jeremiah 6:20; Job 6:19).

When the LORD avenges His covenant people, He will sell the descendants of the Phoenicians and the Philistines to the descendants of Judah. The people of Judah will in turn sell these godless people to the *Sabeans*. This would surely happen because *the LORD has spoken*. This is the principle of reciprocity, which appears in Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:17-21, and Deuteronomy 19:21.

This prophecy could have been partially fulfilled during the reign of King Uzziah of Judah: "Now he went out and warred against the Philistines, and broke down the wall of Gath and the wall of Jabneh and the wall of Ashdod; and he built cities in *the area of Ashdod* and among the

Philistines. God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians who lived in Gurbal, and the Meunites” (2 Chron. 26:6-7). This is uncertain since the time of Joel’s prophecy is unknown.

The first locust invasion predicted by Joel (Joel 1:4) took place in 586 BC, when the Babylonians invaded Judah and began to deport its citizens to Babylon. The second wave of locusts was the Persians, who defeated the Babylonians, who in turn were displaced by the Greeks. In 343 BC, the Persian king Artaxerxes III Ochus conquered and enslaved Sidon, while the Greek conqueror Alexander the Great conquered Tyre and sold 30,000 people into slavery in 332 BC. These were likely partial fulfillments of this prophecy. Nevertheless, the LORD will someday fulfill this prophecy completely when He restores the fortunes of Judah (v. 1).

### **Biblical Text**

**Moreover, what are you to Me, O Tyre, Sidon and all the regions of Philistia? Are you rendering Me a recompense? But if you do recompense Me, swiftly and speedily I will return your recompense on your head.<sup>5</sup> Since you have taken My silver and My gold, brought My precious treasures to your temples,<sup>6</sup> and sold the sons of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks in order to remove them far from their territory,<sup>7</sup> behold, I am going to arouse them from the place where you have sold them, and return your recompense on your head.<sup>8</sup> 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,” for the Lord has spoken.**