

Text: Joel 3:12-16.

9th Sunday after Pentecost.

August 9, 2020.

Grace and peace are yours through the LORD our refuge. Amen.

What have you lost lately? Retirement funds? House? A family member? Why? Why would God allow these treasures to be lost? Maybe to show us income, retirement funds, house, even family is not our greatest treasure. Only the LORD is. Maybe God wanted to show us, needed to show us, "The LORD will be a refuge for his people." Maybe you aren't too different from me. The one piece of mail I looked forward to getting was our mortgage statement. Maybe that's not like you. But it showed how much closer we were to paying it off, owning our home. Was I making my house a greater treasure than God? I could tell you to the dollar how much we owed and the exact date we could celebrate paying it off. But how much greater a refuge is the LORD? How much more wonderful to have God be my stronghold. Three years of record gains in the stock market wiped out in like three days. Were those retirement funds your refuge? Or did we need to learn, "The LORD will be a refuge for his people." I found out my cousin was the first person in Racine County diagnosed with COVID 19. He recovered by the grace of God. But is family my future? Or it is the LORD? Now I'm not saying for a second that retirement funds are sinful or owning a home is bad. And yes, pay your mortgage and love your family. But view these gifts as gifts from God. We can't let these gifts replace God who is the giver. We can't take refuge in God's gifts more than we take refuge in God. Maybe a better question to start with is, "What have you not lost?" You didn't lose the LORD. And he is your refuge. You didn't lose God and he is your stronghold. You didn't lose your greatest treasure, because the LORD will be a refuge for his people. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. Keep saying that. Repeating that. Thinking that. The LORD will be a refuge for his people.

This is kind of a scary part of the Bible. All this talk about judgment and destruction and terrifying signs in the sky. And let's not minimize that. But God only lays out the judgment and destruction to help us appreciate the wonderful treasure that the LORD will be a refuge. There's no escaping the judgment. The nations will be roused. It's interesting that this word for nations is usually used to talk about the unbelieving nations, people who don't trust in the LORD as their saving God. Those nations advance into the Valley of Jehoshaphat. I sure your children have three kids in every class with that name so that they have to be Jehoshaphat S and Jehoshaphat W. Or maybe not. The name Jehoshaphat has meaning. It means, "The LORD has judged." And that's what happens in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, the LORD will sit to judge.

Don't overlook that word, "sit." It shows authority. When the judge enters the courtroom, all the people rise to show him respect. You only can be seated after he is seated. The word also has the idea of permanence, like dwell, the LORD will dwell in this place. He will sit and make the final judgment. His verdict can't be challenged when he sits on the judgment seat.

And no one, no one will escape the LORD's judgment. Three emphatic words or phrases. All. Nations. Every side. Every way you look, judgment. Every nation you can imagine. Judgment. All people. Without exception. Judgment.

The LORD uses some very graphic pictures to demonstrate the imminence and necessity of this judgment. But the LORD here uses agrarian pictures that might not be a familiar to us now as they were then. Swing the sickle for the harvest is ripe. The sickle has big, curved blade, like the grim reaper

carries. Large numbers of workers toiled at the same time, in teams, swinging sickles back and forth, cutting down grain, chopping off wheat, bringing the harvest in for an ultimate separation of the bad chaff from the good grain.

Trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow. The first picture of grain was more about the judgment is close. This picture is more about the judgment is deserved. The wickedness is so great and it's accumulated so high, it's like grapes overflowing the vat. Maybe we can better picture being on a winery tour and seeing a large, stainless steel container. Can you picture that overflowing? That's how great their wickedness is.

That's how great our wickedness is. It isn't just the bad people, out there. There's a wicked person, in here. Is your lust at the occasional Facebook ad any less wicked than x rated pornography? Is your gossip, shared for "information," any less wicked than slander on a news site? Is your laziness at work filling up the vat any more slowly than the person who refuses to get a job and leeches off everyone else? Is it any less wicked to run to my family more than God than it is to say there is no god at all? Multitudes, multitudes, and the idea is a noisy crowd, with commotion, an antsy crowd, waiting for something to happen. They are all gathered in the valley of decision, for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. Decision? What's the decision? Who's deciding? What's being decided? Well, remember, we are in the context of judgment. And this word decision is not used in a positive way. It means to speak against. It was used of dogs snarling against enemies. It's a strict decree. A final decision. A decision that can't be changed.

But look at what is near in the Valley of Decision. The day of the LORD! The day of the LORD! The LORD who is unchangeable love is going to have his day. The LORD who sent his Son to pay for our sins is having it his way. The LORD decided long ago to call you his child. The LORD made the decision, "This one is mine! I baptized you. I washed you clean. I decided you would be my child. I decided to set up a relationship with you, a relationship I will never change. My decision is final. My decision can't be changed. No one, no one has more power than I to overturn my decision, to supersede my decree. I am the LORD. This is my day. This is my decision." Wow! Yes, there is good news in the valley of decision. The LORD shows his love in Jesus. The LORD applies his love in Christ.

Let's be clear about this decision and this day. The decision is not mine, like I decided to be on God's good side by making the right choices. The LORD made a choice based on his grace, to put me on his good side in spite of my bad choices and overflowing wickedness. The LORD judged me, "Not guilty! Jesus' body assures it. Jesus' blood proves it. Jesus' empty tomb is the evidence that no enemy can oppose." When the LORD has his day, the LORD gets his way and gathers all his people in the most wonderful harvest of souls.

Yes, the day of the LORD involved judgment, but I personally would rather think of the day of the LORD than judgment day. Now, the Bible uses both terms, judgment day and the day of the LORD and we can see either term as positive or negative, but I'm inclined to think that judgment is usually a negative term, implying more condemnation, whereas the day of the LORD? That depends on what you think of the LORD. The day of the LORD? That depends on your relationship with the LORD. And what a comfort to know the LORD has decided my relationship with him is good! What a comfort to know the LORD will be a refuge for his people.

Doesn't matter what happens on Earth. Doesn't matter what I lose here and now. As long as I still have the LORD, I still have my refuge! We say, "Well, the sun will come up tomorrow." Not on the day of the

LORD! The sun will be darkened, and the moon too. Even the stars won't shine. What? This has to be terrifying! No sun? But we still have the Son of God! No stars? But those who lead others to righteousness will shine like stars. You see, even those things in nature we think will never change, will be gone, even the things that seem most certain, will eventually pass away. Do you know that the Bible says in heaven there will be no sun, or moon, or stars, because the LORD himself will give light in heaven. It won't be heavenly bodies in heaven. It will be the LORD himself. The LORD will be a refuge for his people.

Man, there's a phrase to hang on to. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. I'm so glad the LORD led us to this part of God's Word with all that is going on in our world. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. In the midst of terrible judgment, the LORD will be a refuge for his people. In the midst of overflowing wickedness the LORD will be a refuge for his people. Even if the sun stops shining, God's Son Jesus still shines his love on me. Even if there are no more stars, the star of God's plan Jesus is still on my heart. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. Even if my 401K is now 0K, I will be OK. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. Even if my family is sick. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. Even when I die, the LORD will be a refuge for his people. A stronghold, the very last place you go, when you have exhausted all other options, the stronghold is that very last spot, your Alamo. Maybe the LORD has had to take away things from us, to help us see, the LORD isn't the last place I go. The LORD is the first place I go. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. Maybe the LORD isn't to be my last resort. The LORD is to be my first resort, my all-inclusive resort, my eternal resort. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. I don't think we can hear that too much. The LORD will be a refuge for his people. Can we all say together, "The LORD will be a refuge for his people"? "The LORD will be a refuge for his people." Amen.

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