

In the Valley of Decision

✠ the reality of judgment (vv.12-15)

✠ the triumph of mercy (v.16)

In the Name of Him whose mercies are new every morning, dear fellow redeemed people of God:

“Surely it couldn’t be Vesuvius?” people in Pompeii asked each other when the earth began to shake on August 24, AD 79. The volcano loomed over their...town, but they had no reason to fear it. The volcano had been quiet for so many years...no one could remember when it last erupted. Vesuvius soon answered....With a deafening boom, it exploded. A day later, Pompeii was a tomb of mud and dust.

Disasters don’t all begin with thunderbolts, explosions, or earth tremors. The greatest catastrophe in the history of the world was a silent, invisible killer – the plague. In the mid-14th century rats spread this disease throughout Europe. People called it the Black Death...bubonic plague, because of the huge black buboes (swellings)...on victims’ bodies. The plague struck people already weakened by cold and hunger...Most...died within a week....The epidemic...killed a quarter of Europe’s population.¹

Natural disasters like fires, floods, earthquakes; or engineering disasters like the Titanic or the Hindenburg – what do all have in common? Totally unexpected, terribly deadly, “impossible” according to some experts. People claiming no God, blame God anyway. And the people of God wonder, “Why?” Today God gives us some insights through His prophet Joel **In the Valley of Decision** where we see...

✠ the reality of judgment (vv.12-15)

Disasters have occurred throughout human history. Some were even predicted or prophesied by God. When Isaiah was commissioned as the Lord’s prophet saying, **“Here am I. Send me!”** he also asked, **“How long, O Lord?”** God answered: **“Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,¹²until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken....the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”** (Isaiah 6:11-13 NIV834) For the next hundred years God kept sending prophets with specific warning messages. Still the Israelites were surprised with the LORD, as promised, destroyed His own temple and capital city of Jerusalem. Then as now, there were false teachers. They predicted peace as God warned about disaster.

In prophetic vision these disasters were often lined up with pictures of the greatest human disaster on the Last Day. Earlier the prophet Joel had spoken of a grasshopper plague, connecting it with **the reality of judgment** from God. In our text the LORD God calls to all people, not just the Jews but Gentile non-Jews too. **The Valley of Jehoshaphat** pictures the place where the LORD Jehovah says, **“I will sit to judge all the nations.”** Violence pictures the harvest for people like stalks of grain or grapes: **“Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow, because the nations’ wickedness is so great! Multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Decision! For the Day of the Lord is near in the Valley of Decision. The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars will stop shining.”** (EHV²) In vast prosperity people’s violence and wickedness overflows.

Godly people ask, “How can this be when we’ve worked so hard to reform society?” Isaiah, same question: **“Who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?”** (53:1) Did you catch Jesus’ answer in today’s Gospel? A few years ago a woman found great comfort in not

¹ *Disaster!* Illustrated by Richard Bonson. Written by Richard Platt. DK Publishing, Inc. © 1997. www.dk.com

² Unless noted, Scriptures: *Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV)* © 2019 NPH (800-662-6022). www.wartburgproject.com

blaming God because of Jesus' answer about tragedies in her life. Jesus describes the dismay of the farmhands asking the owner: ***“Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?”*** Answer: ***“An enemy has done this.”*** Suffering is not God's desire. (Lamentations 3:33) Workers asked if they should pull the weeds. The owner's answer to wait reflects **the reality of judgment**. Jesus explains: ***“The enemy who sowed [weeds] is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the world. The reapers are angels....Just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so it will be at the end of the world. The Son of Man will send out his angels...[to] pull out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and those who continue to break the law. The angels will throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.”*** (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) Our ears hear Jesus point to disasters in the news and warns us: ***“Unless you repent, you will all perish too.”*** (Luke 13:5)

People keep asking, “Is God calling America to repentance?” Consider COVID's call to repentance: Into the tumult of ***“multitudes”*** arguing about everything, came this silent, microscopic killer, destroying lives and livelihoods. Medical experts argue even with themselves about prevention and care. Ultimately, only God knows. God reveals the total cure **In the Valley of Decision** with...

✠ the triumph of mercy (v.16)

We worship the God whose ***“mercy triumphs over judgment.”*** (James 2:13) Today, before the Last Day when we will all be **In the Valley of Decision**, you already know the verdict: ***“God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”*** (John 3:16) And God's Love in human flesh says, ***“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”*** (Mark 16:16)

“The LORD will be a refuge...a stronghold for the people of Israel.” We long for the Day when ***“the LORD will roar from Zion”*** and bring His enemies to their knees. He will ***“shout from Jerusalem”*** with victorious joy for His people, at last able to fully enjoy **the triumph of mercy** from God. God wants **mercy** for everyone during this time of grace which He calls “today.” Don't wait; tomorrow may be too late. Today God's **mercy** calls us to wash away our sins. No matter how great your guilt or terrible your trespasses, in **the triumph of mercy** Jesus lived, died and lives again for you, for me, for all.

As we see tragedy, during God-blessed repentance ***“let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*** (Hebrews 4:16) Don't know what to pray? Use the Psalms; they're perfect prayers inspired by God the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Check out the confessional prayer in Daniel 9. When we come to God confessing our sins and pleading for His **mercy**, it's like a dear child asking on Grandpa's lap; her little eyes – ah! Or a growing boy to Grandpa, “I would really like a hamburger.” ***“In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness... because the Spirit intercedes for the saints, according to God's will.”*** (Romans 8:26f EHV)

Looking forward to **the Valley of Decision** brings **the triumph of mercy** in your life too. The son of a classmate and his wife are on the front lines of COVID. As Christ's people, Jon and Paige Fricke live their life for others in spite of danger. Dr. Jon described his first day when a woman tested positive for COVID-19. “She told me she was scared. I took her hand, looked her in the eye, and admitted for the first time ever to a patient that I too was scared.” She mentioned her son was a minister. Dr. Fricke, “My dad is a pastor and it's a large part of the reason I chose to go into medicine. As I shared that with her, the fear and apprehension began to fade away. We were able to support each other as family in Christ.”³

Gamble with disaster, you lose. Plan for the worst, hope for the best by God's grace, ***“Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”*** (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:17-21) Imagine the Lord's delight to have his family finally home. Awesome, glorious, trust God's **mercy In the Valley of Decision**. Amen.

³ “My Christian Life,” by Alicia Neumann. *Forward in Christ*, August 2020, p. 18-20.