

It was a valid question, as they looked around and saw results much different than they expected. As the servants stood before a sea of wheat, slowly shaking their heads in disbelief that the field was suddenly overgrown with weeds, they couldn’t help but ask their master, ***“Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?”***

It’s a valid question, as we look around and see much different results than we’d expect. After all, if God is our Father, then shouldn’t Christian’s lives always be heaven on earth? But as you scan the field, you see ISIS terrorists beheading more Christians; con artists using the tragic death of a pregnant 29-year old mother and her 3 young sons as they drove to VBS, as an avenue to steal money from people who wanted to support the grieving family; thieves shattering a van window in a St. Louis parking lot to steal from Appleton teenagers excited to share Jesus on a mission trip; the comments section of a news article on your laptop, where you read people’s unbridled hatred of Jesus’ followers, suggesting that if Christians took a running leap off a cliff, the world would be better off. And we’re left slowly shaking our heads in sad, wounded frustration, choking out the questions to our Master, “God, why do your people suffer? Why do unbelievers seem to succeed, while believers seem to fail? How long, O Lord?”

“An enemy did this,” the Master replies. That enemy, Satan, slithered into God’s perfect garden, sowing seeds of sin among God’s perfect crop. And from the moment that Adam and Eve ate the fruit and introduced sin and death, the reality for Christians—sinners living in a sinful world with unbelieving sinners, is this: We will struggle. We will suffer at the hands of unbelievers around us. We will struggle against the sinful influence of the world around us. We will struggle with the sinful nature within us. We will struggle. ***“How long, O Lord?”***
“Let both grow together, until the harvest.”

But in love, God doesn’t leave you alone, consumed with fear over the struggle believers will endure in an unbelieving world. He comforts you! Today, we’ll hear **God’s Message for Wheat among Weeds.** God’s simple but profound message: ***“I am your stronghold.”*** A stronghold is a fortified place where people are protected from danger. That’s what God is for you, dear wheat! That message from God for us is both **1.) A Message for Repentance**, and **2.) A Message for Refuge.**

The prophet Joel is often pictured with one of these—a locust—because the first half of Joel’s prophecy occurred as the people of Judah suffered from a horrendous locust plague. Now, maybe you’re wondering, “What’s so scary about locusts?” By themselves, not much. But when locusts join into groups, then groups join into swarms, and swarms join into a plague, locusts become some of the most destructive creatures on earth; numbering in the billions, capable of devouring hundreds of tons of vegetation per day, sometimes covering an area up to 40 miles wide! A locust plague leaves no grass, trees, or plants behind for the people who depend on that vegetation for themselves and their flocks; a harvest field turned to stubble in a terrifying flash.

To make matters worse, this locust plague was accompanied by a severe drought. But maybe the biggest shock wasn’t the double whammy of plague and drought, but that Joel revealed, ***“The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command.”***

God was directing that plague of locusts! But why would God allow something so horrible to strike his people? Because God wanted them to remember his message, ***“I am your stronghold.”*** That was God’s message to drive his people to repentance, to turn away from futile “idols” and back to their stronghold! God wanted to separate his people from the harmful spiritual influences of the unbelieving nations around them, because if God’s people wandered away from him, they’d be unprotected, as foolish as trading a heavily fortified castle

for a tent. So God stripped away everything through locust and drought until they couldn't depend on anything except the one who could actually provide for and protect them.

In love, the LORD invited his people, ***“Return to me with all your heart...return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.”***

Likewise, God sometimes uses seemingly terrible things in our lives to remind us, ***“I am your stronghold.”*** A hospital stay reminds you to trust in God's care, not your health. Getting laid off leads you to depend on God's providence, not your wallet. The gentle rebuke of a friend helps you realize that your life's resembled weeds more than wheat lately. Opposition from unbelievers reminds us that this world isn't home, so don't cling to it. Like a plague of locusts, God can use difficulties to lead us to repent of our self-reliance and idolatry, and steer us back to our impenetrable stronghold who never fails us.

Yet, ***“I am your stronghold”*** isn't just God's message for repentance. It's also his message for refuge, to assure us that he is our refuge—a place where we're safe from danger-- both for our struggles as Christians living in a sinful world right now, and as we look forward to Jesus' return at Judgment Day.

Almost from the beginning, Israel had faced opposition, oppression, attacks, and slavery from the unbelieving nations around them. As God's people, they probably wondered, “Why does it seem like our enemies are winning and we're losing, God?”

As Christians, we know what it's like to be opposed and oppressed by the sinful, unbelieving world. We too have wondered, “Why Lord? How long, Lord?” ***“Let them grow together until the harvest.”*** Joel's prophecy assures us that there will be a harvest; a day when believers and unbelievers will be separated. And God promises to be his people's refuge on that day!

Joel's prophecy paints a pretty terrifying picture of Judgment Day. All people will be gathered together before God's judgment seat, where his judgment will be announced and executed, commanding his angels, ***“Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe...trample the grapes for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness.”*** Right now, believers and unbelievers share the field, leading to persecution and oppression that makes people cry out, “How long, O Lord?”

Just like a farmer knows the exact best time to harvest his crops, God knows perfectly the exact time when the fields are ripe for harvest. We don't need to wonder about the timing of God's return. He knows the perfect time to harvest the field of the world, for the good of his children.

Joel describes the wonder of that day, ***“The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The LORD will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem, and the earth and the sky will tremble.”*** Can you imagine the utter terror that will be felt when the world becomes dark, the earth and sky shake like an earthquake, and God roars and thunders with all his power? Judgment Day will be a day of terror...for the unbeliever; for the unbeliever who doubted God's existence, scoffed at his name, and persecuted God's people; the reality of God's existence will become terrifyingly clear on that day when the weeds and wheat are separated for eternity.

And yet, Joel follows this chilling picture of God's wrathful harvest with so much beautiful assurance. ***“But the LORD will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.”***

I love watching storms. I'll often sit in my living room with the lights off and watch the bright flashes of lightning and loud, house-shaking thunder; huge drops of rain, and wind that blows it sideways. They fascinate me. And yet, a couple of months ago, I got caught between church and home as a huge storm was

approaching. Let me tell you, as I stepped out the front door as the sky blackened, the wind howled, and thunder started to rumble, I sprinted home as fast as I could, my heart racing until I was safely inside my house.

I love to watch storms...when I'm safely protected in my own home. But when I'm unprotected out in the elements, then I feel terrified to face that exact same storm.

That's why God's reminder, *"I am your stronghold"* is such a message of refuge. God sent Christ as our perfect substitute for sin, we're now safe in a fortress constructed with Christ's innocent blood, and an empty tomb. When Christ returns, Judgment Day won't come with an expectation of fiery wrath and destruction, but with a certainty of freedom...freedom for eternity from the struggles and suffering of life in this sinful world. Our loving God will take his children in his arms, and we will ***"shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father."*** We are safe and protected in the perfect love of our Savior, our refuge and stronghold!

And yet, God's message doesn't just comfort us for Judgment Day, but every day. Judgment Day assures us that the injustice of the world today won't go unjustified. Oppression won't go unpunished. The Christian mocked for their faith will be validated. Your stronghold will not fail to protect you from every harm and danger. Even the Christian martyred for their faith will be brought safely home for eternity! When we know the story ends in peace, we can make it through the day-to-day struggles with peace.

I've never known a mother who thought 9 months of pregnancy, followed by many hours of hard labor was enjoyable. But I've also never known a mother who didn't think it was worth it when they held their beautiful new baby. Olympians suffer for decades, sacrificing their blood, sweat, and tears in training. Yet, I've never heard one standing on the gold medal podium say, "This wasn't worth it." When you suffer with an eye towards something amazing or beautiful, then you're willing to struggle for it, because the result is far more valuable than the struggle.

In the day to day struggle and suffering as wheat among weeds, *"I am your stronghold."* As your life draws to a close, or Judgment Day draws near, *"I am your stronghold."* ***"The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"***