

Joel 6: Our repenting and God's relenting

Read Joel 2: 12-17 and pray; *O Lord of all grace and mercy, open our eyes to see your liberating truth, and open our ears to hear your call to repentance and new life through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

As we continue our journey through Joel chapter 2, we now reach the **turning point** in this prophecy. From here on light begins to dawn and wonderful hope begins to emerge. Last week we were confronted and challenged by Joel's great and awesome message concerning **the Day of the Lord**. This "great and dreadful day" (v11) has now come upon Joel's nation in the form of a devastating locust plague which Joel vividly describes again in 2:1-11. Ominously **the Day** was also "**still to come**" in the form of the return of Jesus, the Son of Man, with power and great glory at the very end of world history. (see sermon entitled "The Day of the Lord")

Joel, as a faithful prophet of the Lord, is sounding an alarm to his nation. (v1) How often alarms systems go off today only to be ignored. Joel sounds this alarm to alert and warn the people of the serious nature of *the Day of the Lord*, for it is "a day of darkness and gloom, of clouds and blackness"; (v2) it is near, and it should cause them to tremble. (v1) Therefore, Joel concludes this section with a question to which the answer seems blatantly obvious. Here is the prophet's stark question to all who hear his word from the Lord;

The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? (11)

That is the great question. Who *on earth* can endure the day of God's personal visitation and intervention, the day He comes to judge with righteousness and in truth? And the answer has to be - no-one. **No-one can endure God coming down upon the earth to judge.** This is not dissimilar to a question raised by the Psalmist;

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? (Psalm 130:3) No-one! As the Psalmist makes clear elsewhere; ***Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, NOT EVEN ONE.*** (Psalm 53:3)

But according to Joel, the situation is not entirely hopeless. In fact, there is **great hope** and a pathway to not only enduring the day of the Lord but to rejoicing in it. The day of the Lord can be a day of absolutely glorious salvation, transformation and everlasting hope. How could there be such a turn-around? That is the question we all want answering. And the answer is this. You can endure **that day**, there can be a fantastic turn-around, **if**, and only if, YOU TURN AROUND. The prophet explains that his people must turn around to face God. We too must return to God. We have all been guilty of **turning away** from God (see above Psalm 53:3) – now we must turn back to God. We must return **to** God and re-turn **toward** facing God.

This call through the prophet Joel comes not once but twice because of its critical importance and because it is *non-negotiable*.

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart...." (2:12)

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate (2:13)

The message is clear. The word goes forth with power and conviction from the prophet. **Return to God.** This is the archetypal message about **repentance** and return that was shared by all the prophets, including John the Baptist – and then reiterated **by Jesus Himself.** (Mark 1:4, 14-15) Most prophets arose and were called by God to issue the call for the people to return to their God.

And here Joel speaks about the true nature of the real repentance that God looks for in his people, and which enables them to stand, survive and be safe *on the day of the Lord*. (2:32, 3:16)

We can examine what “returning” or “repenting” means in a moment, but let me briefly deal with the question of why returning to God and his gracious and transforming love enables us to face the great and dreadful day of the Lord and come through it as survivors and worshippers.

Returning to God achieves 2 vital things for a human being and they are connected.

Firstly, **if we repent**, if we return, we become **right** with God. Returning leads to peace and gracious favour with God. We are made right through God’s loving forgiveness of our sin. We are justified in his sight. The barrier of our sin, evil and guilt is removed. This means that we can now walk in peace, harmony, joy and love with God. God becomes our greatest friend rather than our threatening foe. We now enjoy true rest, peace and reconciliation with God. Friendship with the Creator God is re-established. In the words of Isaiah; *In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...* (Isaiah 30:15). If we are at peace with God, if we are in “right relationship” to God, we need not fear the day of the Lord. As the apostle Paul puts it: *Therefore, since we have been justified (made right) through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* Put simply, returning to God leads to peace with God; peace of heart, mind and conscience.

Secondly, if we repent and return to God, we not only become **right** with God through forgiving grace, we become **ready** for God and for the Day of His coming. Who can possibly endure the Day of God’s coming? Who can be ready for it? The one who is clothed with God’s forgiveness, righteousness, and peace through the Saviour Jesus Christ. We can be fully ready when we enjoy a complete peace with God. (2 Peter 3:14) We can be “without blemish and free from accusation” through Christ’s blood. (Colossians 1:22) There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

This is why the message of repentance is **good** news, not bad or negative news. (Mark 1: 14-15) Repentance and faith in Jesus put you right with God and ready for God! That’s good news! Are you ready for the Day of the Lord? Are you in right relationship with God? Have you genuinely turned back to God? Or are you still turning away from Him? The prophet urges us to return – and so do I!

Here is what returning means, what it entails according to the teaching of Scripture.

Repentance, or *biblical* returning, means that you completely change direction – the direction of your life. You do a U Turn. You undergo a complete and total change of heart and mind. Instead of being someone who turns away from God and His love and His will, you consciously and intentionally turn back to face God, walk with God, and do what He says. God now becomes your primary focus and love. You change from being self-concerned and self-centred to being someone who is primarily concerned about pleasing God and therefore God-centred. You become a God-centred individual. You *turn away* from your own preferred way of living, and *turn toward* God to live for God’s glory with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.

Notice, and this is crucial, that repentance must be inward and from the heart. It is not about outward shows of sorrow and regret; it is not about “tearing your garments” says Joel. (2: 13) It is about the tearing and breaking of the heart; a heart which is completely broken and contrite, with genuine sorrow for all the hurt you have caused God and others. Your repentance, your sorrow and regret must be truly “heartfelt” and heart changing. As the Psalmist makes clear; *“a broken and contrite heart God will not despise”*. (Psalm 51:17). “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, said Jesus. Blessed are the humble. Blessed are those who, from the heart, from the core of their being, **turn back**, toward God. In the bible, the heart refers to the very centre or core of our personality and being, and it includes

our mind, our emotions, our will and our intellect. This returning to God with the heart is therefore the deepest and most profound of all turnings. Are you ready for such a deep turning to take place *within you*? Have you already experienced and embraced this deep turning within the heart?

True returning and repenting therefore must include a real change in action and behaviour. John the Baptist told his hearers to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” (Matthew 3:8). In other words, actually live life according to God’s will and God’s love! Joel’s hearers were clearly not doing this; they had broken covenant with their God. They had embraced idolatry. This was a recurring issue and a repeated sin – but whatever the sin they committed or we commit, returning to God means stopping sinful practices and starting righteous godly living and loving. We begin to embrace God and His love, and walk in obedience to God’s laws of love; we turn away and cease from all activity that God hates and condemns. As you read the bible, what God hates and condemns become obvious. We cease to do what God clearly condemns and we strive to live according God’s love and grace, and He gives us the power of his Holy Spirit to do so. **(Read Galatians 5:19-25, Colossians 3:5-14)**. God’s word is given to guide us into true heartfelt, practical, repentance that leads us to being right with God and ready for God’s coming and God’s Day. Because God sees into the inner recesses of our hearts, He knows what is genuine and also what is false. There is no fooling the all-knowing God. (Psalm 139) God knows the true condition of our hearts and every motive and movement within them.

There are some outstanding examples of true repentance in the bible. King Manasseh of Judah is a most notable one. **Read 2 Chronicles 33: 1-16**. You clearly see how Manasseh stopped practising certain things forbidden by God, and started positively to do the things that pleased and delighted God. This was practical, real, heartfelt and ongoing repentance. (see also Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10)

This is what Joel exhorted his people to do. Return to God with all their hearts. Joel also emphasised that the people could **return to God confidently** because God has such an outstandingly gracious and compassionate nature, and loves to forgive and restore his repentant people. Here in Joel is one of the greatest and most frequent descriptions of God’s nature in the OT. (Exodus 34: 6-9, Nehemiah 9:17, Jonah 4:2, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8)

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. (2:13)

As we repent, so God **relents** from righteous anger and just judgement. This is what you need to KNOW and UNDERSTAND about God announces Joel! If you return to God, you will discover that God is pure grace and compassion, forgiveness and love. God abounds in love and grace. This is what you see everywhere in the story of the bible and in the person of Jesus. The complete forgiveness and restoration of repentant souls. God in his holy being and nature is “rich in love”. The infinite wealth of his love knows no bounds for the repentant soul. God’s love, grace, compassion, mercy and forgiveness are vast - limitless. Immeasurable are the riches of his grace in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:8, 18-19). Joel powerfully asserts that if his people wholeheartedly return to God – He will return to them and lavish upon them abundant gracious love, tender compassion and total forgiveness. For us, the final proof of this love is in Jesus. Jesus’s life and character perfectly mirrors and reflects God’s true merciful and gracious nature. Jesus is God’s love, grace and compassion personified – in the flesh – in the world – in our hearts! *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father explained Jesus.* (John 14:9)

But there are other vital things Joel includes in his call to return and we **must** note them and understand them.

Firstly, we can only avert calamity and disaster on the day of the Lord by living a truly repent life. Without repentance we cannot experience God’s gracious nature, forgiveness and love. Repentance

is a must, and we must not deceive ourselves or others about this. We cannot experience the Kingdom without this great change in our hearts and minds taking place. **Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand** declared both John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ who is Lord!

Notice, when Joel instructs the people to “return” the verb is in the imperative mood. It is a command; it is an order. It must be obeyed. This is not up for debate. Without repentance there can be no hope, but with it – hope abounds! Not only is it a command, it is God doing the commanding – yes through the prophet, but God nevertheless. This is Joel literally quoting God – speaking God’s words. **Notice the speech marks in the text.** “Even now” DECLARES THE LORD, “return to me with all your heart....”.

Not only is the call directly from the mouth of God, it is URGENT. This needs to be done sooner rather than later. We need to ACT on this word post-haste. It is time- limited for the day of the Lord is indeed near – close at hand. Don’t leave returning to tomorrow or next week or next year or later in life. You are very likely to miss your chance. You do not know how soon it will be too late! There always needs to be a divine urgency in the Church’s preaching of repentance – just as there was in the NT, both in teaching of Jesus (Mark 1:15, Luke 13:1-9) and the Spirit-filled preaching of his chosen apostles. (Acts 2:38, 17:30, 26:17)

We must never fall into the trap of presuming upon God and his nature in any way. It is His sovereign right to extend mercy to whoever He wishes; (Romans 9:14-18). This is why Joel remarks, “Who knows – He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing.” (14) Don’t ever act presumptuously toward God. Always be humble. Be honest and sincere in repentance and simply cast yourself upon His mercy.

It is also **never too late** to return to God. “Even now” says Joel, at this eleventh hour, you can reach out and return to God. It is never too late in life to return to this gracious God, as long as you are genuine in your repentance. There is no greater example of this than the thief on the cross crucified next to Jesus. About to die, perhaps within minutes, the thief begs for mercy. Jesus senses this man’s repentant heart and confirms that the thief will join him that day in paradise. (Luke 23:42-43)

Despite what I have just said to you about this redeemed thief, I do not recommend death-bed repentance as a practice. The whole point of Joel’s preaching is to encourage an immediate and swift return to God – right now – not later – but today. “Even now”. For the day of the Lord is at hand. He will come like a thief in the night. You have no idea when your life will end, or when He will come again. Put things right with God swiftly and know his forgiveness, restoration and incomparable peace.

Then maintain repentance as a **daily practice**. Intentionally, return to Lord and offer your life to him every day you live in this world. Each morning turn toward God and his will, and turn away from sin and evil. Christians must learn and know that repentance is a way of life – a way of facing each and every day victoriously in Christ. Each day we die to self and rise with Christ. Every day we take up our cross and follow Jesus. (Luke 9:23) Repentance is not only required at the outset of the Christian journey; it must mark every day of the journey from our conversion to our final redemption. Every day we ask for forgiveness and turn from evil and seek to pursue God and his kingdom and righteousness. (Matthew 6:33) There is to be no let up. I return to God each morning. I urge you to do the same.

Finally, and this was extremely important to Joel and his message concerning our return to the Lord. He urged corporate repentance as well as individual repentance. In fact, “community” or “national” repentance took up more of his message than individual repentance. (1: 13-15, 2: 15-17) Joel asks for the trumpet to be blown again and **for the priests** to take up the solemn responsibility of leading the whole people, young and old in the prayers of repentance and petition. The urgency was so real that bride and bridegroom should wait to consummate their marriage and instead prioritise praying with their people during the national crisis. (2:16) As I have sought to stress before, the need today for the

whole Church to return to God is paramount. Together, as one people, we must consistently return to God and beg Him to return to us in restoring power, grace and love. Joel urged the lifting up of a short but nevertheless profound and powerful prayer;

Spare your people, O Lord.

There is no more urgent and relevant petition for the Church in the UK to make today. We must humbly ask God to “spare” the remnant of His people in this land and to graciously and kindly pour out his life-giving Spirit upon us. (2:29) I say again, the situation facing the Church in this nation is very serious. The Church is often reduced to being an object of scorn, derision and ridicule. (2:17) Let us cry out to God to restore our fortunes, (Psalm 126: 4-6) and to vindicate his name and glory.

Hasten, O God, to save me (us): O Lord, come quickly to help me (us) Psalm 70:1

Or as the Psalmist cries out in another place;

Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved Return to us, O Lord God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself. Psalm 80: 1-3, 14-15

And once the Church has learned to understand what it really means to “return to God”, with contrite hearts and humble spirits, and then walk consistently in a spirit of repentance, she can then be in a position to lead any enquiring and humble part of the nation back to God, should God, in His mercy, decide to pour out new streams of grace and mercy upon this dry and barren land. In the meantime, the prophets have the last word on repentance; we must hear it and heed it.

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him: “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips”. (Hosea 14: 1-2)

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isaiah 55: 6-7)

Rend your heart and not your garments. 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. (Joel 2:13)

To our God, gracious, compassionate, patient, merciful, kind and abounding in love – to Him be all glory and honour, praise and love, now and always. Amen.

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