

Joel 7: Renewing the face of the earth

Please read **Joel 2: 18-27** and pray; *God of renewing and restoring power, send your Spirit upon us so that the rich treasures in your Word may be opened up to us, that we might know your gracious and glorious restoring love and healing power, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

We have reached a most wonderful and encouraging turning point in the prophecy of Joel. As we will discover, it is actually a **double-turning point**. In the midst of an unprecedented disaster in the life of his nation (1:2), Joel has urged and pleaded with his people, led by the priests (1:13-14, 2:17), to **return to the Lord** (2:13) who is the God of grace, mercy and compassion, and whose nature abounds with love. (2:13) Returning the Lord with all their hearts – otherwise known as *true repentance*, will trigger a turning point in the fortunes of the nation – but their repentance must be absolutely genuine and marked by true brokenness of heart and reformation of life. Then the Lord will answer (2:18). God will respond! The Lord Himself will *turn* and release the restoring power of his Spirit upon their land (2:18-27) and upon their lives (2:28-32). The Spirit of life *will be sent* to restore the land and the people through God's renewing power. Israel will again come **to know** that God is in their midst. (2:27)

Repentance is therefore the **key to restoration** and there is in Scripture a binding link or connection between the two. You simply cannot have restoration and reconciliation with God without repentance. There can be no new or eternal life unless we repent of all sin and embrace God's good laws of love and freedom. Jesus's command is this; **Repent for the Kingdom of God is near.** (Mark 1:15). Joel's message was "Return to the Lord".

It is plain from Scripture that you cannot *receive* the Kingdom or *enter* the Kingdom and experience eternal life without first repenting of personal sin. This involves a complete change of mindset and direction in life, and for the rest of your life. The call to repentance involves setting our hearts on God and his will, and turning away from our own selfish and sinful tendencies. The Kingdom coming into us means **our will** must be pushed out through the exit door. Christ becomes King and Lord in our lives. What a liberating change takes place! What a change of mindset, direction and leadership!

On the day of Pentecost, after Peter had revealed in his sermon that a key prophecy of Joel had now been fulfilled, he was asked by the crowds what they must **do** in order to experience salvation and restoration of hope with God. And Peter's reply?

Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38)

Repent! Turn right around! And then receive and know the complete forgiveness of sins through Jesus, and receive also the gift of the Holy Spirit who will bring you such amazing new power, renewal and restoration.

As you read Joel chapter 2, we see, or we are led to believe that the nation did actually repent with all their hearts. The community embraced wholehearted repentance and turning to God. This was turning point 1 if I may put it like that. Turning point 2 then occurred – and with swiftness. God now turned toward his people in abundant mercy, love and compassion and personally undertook to restore their land that had been so utterly devastated by the plague/army of locusts. There is therefore a **double turning**. A wholehearted returning to God by the people, and then the turning away of God's anger and a releasing of God's forgiving and restoring love and power. God turns back toward his people in mercy and love. Mercy triumphs over judgement. **Joel 2 v 18-27**, which is our bible reading today, is really **"God's answer"** to true repentance. And God's answer is **miraculous renewal and restoration**.

And Joel reveals this in two distinct parts. From verses 18-27 he speaks of the full restoration of **the land**, and in verses 28-32 (the Pentecost reading), the prophet speaks of glorious and full **spiritual restoration** and spiritual empowerment of a new order.

Today we will focus much more on the restoration and renewing **of the land**, and of the creation. Next week we will look at the renewing of the **creature**, of men and women who are made in the image of God, but who now need that image and likeness restoring through God's gracious gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. (Joel 2:32, Acts 2: 38-39)

What we notice to begin with is that there were **two aspects of God's nature** that were aroused or awakened by the people's repentance. Once the people had turned their hearts toward God with weeping and mourning and heartfelt sorrow, God's **mercy** and **jealously** were quickly fanned into a brilliantly active flame. How does the Lord **answer** or respond to the true repentance of his people? Here is the answer to that question in the text;

THEN the Lord will be JEALOUS for his land and take pity (have mercy) on HIS people. (2:18)

God responds to the sorrow and suffering of his repentant people with a massive outpouring of his mercy (a mercy we see constantly in Jesus), and a rising up of loyal passion for the welfare and wellbeing of *his own people*. His mercy and kindness are great. His passionate and pure jealous love for his own people is also great, instinctive and protective. (see also 3:16)

And from this arousal or awakening of God's mercy and passionate/protective love – we have a two-way resolving and repairing of the previous devastation caused by the locust army.

Firstly, God drives out the problem (21). He drives out the locusts with his powerful hand. They are driven out (almost certainly by powerful winds) towards the "eastern and western sea" which refers to the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea respectively. This is how we understand the reference to the terrible stench that will rise, because often the bodies of many millions of dead locusts will be washed ashore only to rot on the shoreline. (20b) The plague though is finally wiped out. This is precisely what happened when God, through his power, dispersed the locust plague that He had sent upon Egypt in the build up to the Exodus. God drove the locusts out of the land of Egypt once Moses had prayed to the Lord after Pharaoh's change of heart.

And the Lord changed the wind to a very strong west wind, which caught up the locusts and carried them into the Red Sea. Not a locust was left anywhere in Egypt. (Exodus 10:19)

So, the first thing God does in this instance is to *drive out* the locusts. This is step one in His plan to restore and renew. And I find it fascinating to note that when Jesus came to offer the Kingdom of heaven to the world, the first thing he did and taught his disciples to do, was to **drive out** demons, and therefore to drive out and drive back the Kingdom of darkness. When Jesus arrived with the Kingdom, the demons rightly feared for their continued existence and they expected destruction. (Mark 1:21-28, 32-34) Can I remind you and encourage you with this sure and certain fact. Jesus can **drive any form of darkness out of your life**. Jesus can and will have mercy and cast out any evil that oppresses and harms you. Repent, for the Kingdom of God is here! Good news indeed!

Let us move on. Once the Lord has driven away the locusts for good, he then **sends** his love and his faithfulness in the form of abundant rains upon the land. (23-24). God drives away the locusts and then sends the rains. He sends them "in righteousness" which means that he sends them because relations are now "right" between him and his people as a result of true repentance and God's responsive forgiveness and love. The Holy Spirit is the One who creates and recreates and renews the land, the creation, the face of the earth. (Psalm 104:30) There will now quickly be a return to the

greening of the landscape, the rapid re-growth of trees, and the plentiful supply of all fruits. (22-23) All the trees will blossom and produce their fruits; the store houses for grain will be needed once again; the vats will start to overflow with copious amounts of wine and oil. (24) The staple foods will be back in plentiful supply (24,26). There will be no lack whatsoever, and the land itself (21) and the livestock and wild animals will sense relief and experience joy. (22). All the awful damage that we have read about in 1:5-20 will be overturned.

The damage inflicted by the locust plague will be entirely reversed and turned on its head. There will be complete restoration and renewal of the land. In fact, and this is the most incredible thing of all about God's wonderful work of mercy and restoration, God will *personally* see to it that anything that has been stolen away by the locusts will be fully replaced and completely compensated for. In what is one of the most famous and glorious promises in Joel's prophecy, we have these words of hope;

I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten – (2:25)

God will make amends. God will restore in a bountiful and beautiful manner. The restoration to come will far outweigh the previous losses, tears, torment, distress and suffering. This will result in Israel knowing for certain that **God is really in Israel**. The presence of God and his grace is going to be so real and powerful and obvious to everyone who looks on – to Israel and to their enemies who have poured scorn on them previously. **God will be "in them". Their God will return to take up residence among them. (27)** This will be their lived and joyful experience!

This is why the prophet Joel exhorts the people to start "rejoicing" immediately. Good times are going to return, and blessings are going to be experienced in an abundant measure. (23,26). Joy, praise and thanksgiving can begin in the certainty that God will restore and renew all things!

Let me begin to apply this to us and to take you into the NT and the way that God brings restoration and renewal to us and to the world (the land) in a most amazing manner.

Jesus is of course **the central saving figure** in God's glorious plan of restoration for people and for the earth itself and indeed the entire created order. The world, the earth, the people, have been broken and devastated by human sin and rebellion. The creation itself groans with pain. (Romans 8:20-21) It is cursed, damaged, and in bondage to decay, and yearning for the liberation of the children of God.

Then Jesus enters the world stage. God himself enters the world He created but which is now in such a mess, broken by sin and suffering, disease and death. When Jesus came and started his Spirit-filled ministry, he came with a dynamic restorative message which he personally embodied. It was the message of the Kingdom – the kingdom of God. *Repent – for the kingdom of God is now at hand*. The rule and reign of God was *here* at last – **in and with Jesus**, the Son of God. Jesus was the Saviour, the Lord, the promised King, and the Restorer. And wow – did He start to restore things through the way he demonstrated in mercy and compassion *the presence of the Kingdom here and now*.

He restored light where there had been crippling darkness – he drove out demons!

He restored the sight of the blind.

He restored hearing to the deaf and the speech to the mute.

He restored the flesh of the lepers.

He restored the limbs of the lame.

He restored the dignity and position of the socially despised and marginalised.

He even restored life to the dead.

He restored order and calm to raging seas.

He healed every disease and sickness among the people and drove out every demon that oppressed.

Jesus says to thousands upon thousands of damaged individuals then and now, to any who repent, "I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten." What extraordinarily good news!

What's more glorious than every other miracle, Jesus restored people into right relationship with God as he forgave their sins and set them free to live for God. *Your sins are forgiven – go in peace.*

And by dying on the cross for the sin, rebellion and sickness of the world, and by totally defeating death through his glorious resurrection – Jesus alone, has made it possible for people to return to God and receive full forgiveness, become children of God knowing God as their Father, and receive the most amazing gift of the Holy Spirit (which Joel spoke of in 2:28).

As people **repent now** in response to the gospel, so begins a most powerful work of change and restoration within them. This is done by the Holy Spirit who gives repentant people a new heart, a new nature, a new kingdom, and a new abundant life through the living presence of Jesus. The Holy Spirit works within the heart *to restore the broken image of God and Christ*. (2 Corinthians 3:18, Romans 8:29). The Spirit's renewing work is **internal, intentional and revolutionary**. The *fruit* that comes from the Spirit's renewing work is wonderful and beautiful to behold and experience; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; (Galatians 5:22). Old harmful destructive habits and behaviours are crucified through the Spirit's power and the Kingdom's presence within us. The presence of God seated on the throne of our hearts and lives makes all the difference! Darkness and evil are driven out like the locusts, and the new landscape of God's love and grace begins to grow and bloom like the restored of the land in Israel.

We are being prepared for God's ultimate future Kingdom glory. We are being renewed for God's arrival. If God is the great Artist and we are the painting that desperately needs restoring, the Holy Spirit is the brush and colours through which God restores. The Spirit's empowering and refining presence living and working within us is good news. His loving brushstrokes heal and restore us to glory. On the great and glorious day of the Lord which Joel speaks so much about, Christ will come again in glory and with power, to fully reclaim, redeem and restore his own people. The work that he has so tenderly and compassionately started in us will be completed. (Philippians 1:6, 9-11) We will be totally sanctified and glorified in his presence – fully restored in every way – and granted a new resurrection body – fit for eternal glory. (1 Corinthians 15:42-29). His image will be perfectly restored in us and we will be fully liberated children of God. (Romans 8:21) Liberated from all entangling sin, destructive evil, suffering, frustration, pain and death. Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the weight of glory that *will be revealed* in us and to us. (Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Not only will those who are in Christ and in the Kingdom be restored fully, **but the heavens and the earth will be renewed at the coming of Christ** and the dawning of His great day. There will be in the words of Isaiah "a new heavens and a new earth". (Isaiah 65:17) John in Revelation speaks of the same reality and truth - and the Eden so tragically lost in Genesis 3 is restored in Revelation 21:1-5. *Behold – I am making EVERYTHING new*. This is the promise of God. Jesus himself spoke of the renewal of all things. (Matthew 19:28). Peter preached about "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21) at the coming of Christ, which the prophets had promised long ago. That restoration of all things included a new harmonious peace amongst the created order, which included the wolf and the lamb feeding together,

and the lion eating straw like the ox. (Isaiah 65:25) In one of the most beautiful prophetic promises within the prophecy Isaiah we read; (**Read Isaiah 11:6-9**)

And within Joel today we see a restoration for the **land and the people of Israel** coming soon, but in the distant and the far future, there is that even greater and more glorious redemption and renewal of the earth (the land) to come on the great and glorious Day of the Lord. Joel's contemporaries were going to enjoy the restoration of the grass, the trees, the crops and the harvest. There was going to be a super abundance of good things sent by the merciful wonder working God who they were urged to praise joyfully (Joel 2:26). But although this is indeed fabulous and glorious, it is nothing compared with the work of renewal that God will do at His own great coming at the end of history. It won't be just Israel that is restored then, it will be the whole universe. (2 Peter 3: 12-13) There will be a new heavens and new earth and God will come and dwell with his fully restored people. In Joel, the people of Israel we are told "would KNOW that God is in Israel" and "that God is THEIR Lord." (2:27). And this is what will happen above all the other blessings of restoration when the new heaven and earth come down from God. **Read Revelation 21 v 1-4.**

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. This is the ultimate blessing – the fountainhead of all blessings! The fullness of Almighty God with us!

Read also Revelation 22: 1-7

The complete renewal of all things will take place. The Kingdom of God that was so clearly evidenced in Jesus's ministry as he restored to life and wholeness the sick and demonised will now be fully manifested and completely established all over the new earth. And all those in Christ will reign with him for ever and ever.

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. What a hope! What a future! Sealed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and through the sending of the Holy Spirit.

Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. (Joel 2:27) The great promise in Joel which came to pass for his generation was a foreshadowing of the ultimate renewal of all things at Christ's second advent.

And now unto God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – be all glory, honour and praise. Amen!

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