

Joel and the Day of the Lord *Sermon 1- A Day of Discipline!*

Passages: Joel 1:1-20
Matthew 11:20-24

In the mid-1980's, an American religious survey reported that 3/4ths of all respondents prefer to think of God as *'friend'* than as *'king'*. Obviously, *'king'* was a bit too severe...too hierarchical for the modern mind. I wonder what would have been the percentage if the two choices on offer were *'friend'* and *'judge'*? No doubt, the split would have been far greater! For the fact is that most people today cannot conceive of things like *'judgment'* or *'wrath'* as even vaguely connected to a God who is love. Even the Biblical concepts of God's sovereignty, His holiness and His ultimate judgment on sin and evil are being set aside at a rapid rate in an effort to purge our minds (and the Bible) of these *uncomfortable* notions about God.

If there's anything, therefore, that I want to do over these next four weeks, it's to **reunite** God's love with all these *uncomfortable* concepts about God. I want to take a new look at God's wrath and judgment in order to see them as important aspects of His love. In fact, I believe that without things like wrath and judgment, we end up with a God made in our own image—a God who has very little to offer to the human race because He's been stripped of His power to save us! But, we'll get onto that a bit later.

The primary text that we will use as a base for this 4-week exercise will be the Book of Joel.

Let's pray.

As you heard during the reading of chapter one, the message of the Book of Joel is based around a historical event-- a locust plague that hit the nation of Israel in about 825 BC. And so, the prophet is trying to make sense of this plague. He's trying to draw theological conclusions from the devastation that has come upon the nation of Israel. Above all, he's trying to understand *the love of God* from within the context of this incredible disaster that has

befallen them.

Now, there's no doubt that Joel was very much aware of 'God's *electing* love' of Israel...that Israel was chosen by God ('*elected*') to be His agent of redemption for the whole world. It all goes back to the day when God chose Abraham and made promises to bless him and his descendants, and through them, to bless the entire world. Over successive years, it was out of this '*electing love*' that God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt and took them through the desert into the Promised Land. God had a particular love for Israel, not because she was numerically or morally *superior* than the other nations, but simply because Israel would be the nation through which the Messiah, Jesus, would be born. Salvation would come from the Jews!

But, of course, this never meant that Israel could get away with murder! God never planned for His child, Israel, to become a self-centred brat! And that's why God often brought His *judgment* (or *wrath*) upon Israel—what the Bible also refers to as the "*rod of God's discipline!*" Discipline, you see, was an integral part of being elected! If Israel was going to grow up into mature adulthood and be capable of taking her place in the world as a true reflection of God's character, then God needed to instil His character in her....**through the discipline of love!**

Dt 4:36 ***From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire.***

Ps 94:12 ***Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law...***

Pr 3:11-12 ***My son, do not despise the LORD'S discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.***

Pr 6:23 ***... the corrections of discipline are the way to life...***

Psalm 99:8 "You were to Israel a forgiving God though you punished their misdeeds."

It's important to remember that, quite often, harsher sounding words like '*wrath*', '*judgment*' and '*punishment*' are used as synonyms for the word

'discipline'. They are often found in the same sentence!

Jer 30:11 ***"I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished."***

Ps 6:1 ***O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.***

Eze 20:34-37 ***"...with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath...I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you...I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant."***

My point is this: No matter what word was used (discipline, judgment, wrath, punishment), the idea was always the same! God was determined that Israel, His chosen child, would learn the virtues of His love (selflessness, fidelity, generosity and grace), no matter what measures were needed. This, according to Joel, was the only reason why God sent a plague of locusts upon them! Indeed, locusts were to be a teaching tool, not only for the present generation, but for generations to come, helping Israel to develop in God-like character!

Listen to verses 2-4.

Joel 1:2-4 ***Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten.***"

In other words, *"Tell the story of God's discipline! It's nothing to be ashamed about. Rather, it's a sign of God's **electing love**...of His desire to make our nation strong and mature in Him!"*

Now, I know that even with this explanation of the *electing love of God*, some of you may still think that God was going a bit overboard in sending this plague! ...that He was being anything but loving. But there's another aspect of God's *electing love* that we need to understand before we can fully appreciate the intensity of God's discipline. You see, **God's discipline of**

Israel was not only for her sake, but for the sake of the whole world!

Think about it: What would have happened to the world if Israel lost her way? What would have happened if Israel became so distracted by worldly pursuits such as greed, arrogance, and pride that she no longer saw any responsibility towards the nations? Worse still, what would have happened if the ancestry of Jesus got entangled in idolatry and paganism? What if Mary and Joseph's parents or grandparents or great grandparents became unbelievers? Would Mary and Joseph have still been believers? Would they have been able to fulfil their role in preparing a godly home for the coming Messiah? Would they have even seen the angel or heard his advice to keep the child as their own? Would they have, instead, looked for a way to abort the baby? Or worse-- Could they, in their fallen minds, have taken Jesus and sacrificed Him on the altar of Baal? Who knows what might have happened? After all, if the nation of Israel had totally lost her way and abandoned the faith, anything would have been possible!

And so, in 825 BC, God sent a locust plague on His chosen people, Israel. With a clear vision of Israel's destiny and her role as a light to the nations, God disciplined her to bring her back into alignment with her calling as His instrument of grace to the world.

This idea of discipline is clearly seen in **verse 5**.

Joel 1:5 ***Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips.***"

My brother is an alcoholic—how I wish I could take the bottle away from his lips and dry him out...not because I hate him, but because I love him! I want Eric to fulfil his potential as a human being and take up his responsibilities in the world. Isn't this exactly what God did with Israel? He took away the bottle from Israel's lips, not because He hated Israel, but because He loved her. His child had become a drunkard, so God sent in the locusts to strip the land of grapes... which, in turn, ruined the wine industry... which, in turn, made that alcoholic beverage so scarce that Israel could not get drunk again! Sure, it made plenty of people upset! Farmers went broke; The hotels and pubs went out of business! But I tell you; it was a small price to pay to bring Israel back to life!

There's one final aspect of God's *electing love* to which I want to draw your attention. Many people who answered that American questionnaire would have had a *deistic* understanding of God—that is, they would think of God as a distant deity who, (much like Santa Claus) stands aloof from this world for most of the time, occasionally sending nice things our way when He feels benevolent towards us. But this deistic view of God has a flip side to it-- It's very easy to believe that the same God who rewards from a distance also punishes from a distance,... a petulant, capricious God who, like the ancient gods of Rome and Greece, has angry mood swings.

The God of the Bible, however, is nothing like this! Even in the Old Testament, God was never distant! He was always engaged with His people in a personal and relational way. In fact, He was so close to Israel that whenever God punished Israel and caused her to suffer, **God would suffer too!**

Look at **verses 6 and 7** and notice how God suffers *alongside* Israel.

Joel 1:6-7 ***A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white.***

The words “**my land**”, “**my vines**”, and “**my fig-trees**” tell us that God does not stand aloof, watching from a distance as He inflicts His punishment on Israel. He is there, caught up in the pain and suffering of His people.

Indeed, according to **verses 8 to 12**, everyone, *including God*, grieves over the results of this much-needed discipline. Both the bride (Israel) and the bridegroom (God) are in mourning. There is no fertility, there is no fruit, there are no offspring. Everything is barren! Even *the Temple* can no longer function! Without the fellowship offerings of grain and wine, intimate communion between God and humankind was at a standstill. Both Israel and God were mourning this relational break-down together.

But it was even bigger than that! As a conclusion, Joel universalises the whole situation in verse 12 with this comment: ***“Surely the joy of mankind is withered away.”*** But why? Why should a locust plague in Israel affect the whole world? In God's *electing love* for Israel, God's purposes and

plans for the world will be doomed unless Israel can be brought back on track! **Without a healthy Israel to bring His love to the world, no one on earth will be happy!** *“Surely the joy of mankind is withered away.”*

Now, the rest of chapter 1 (verses 13-20) deals with Israel’s response to the locust plague, as God calls on his people to *repent* and *reconsider* their relationship to Him. We’ll deal with this idea next week.

But before we finish up with today’s passage, I want us to take a good look at **verse 15**. You see, one of my main goals in this sermon series is for us to appreciate the love of God *even as He brings the judgment of harsh discipline upon His people, Israel!*

Now, central to this idea is Joel’s use of the phrase, ‘*the Day of the Lord*’. He uses this phrase four times in the three chapters of his prophecy...but tell me, what does it mean??? ***The Day of the LORD*** *is a special term in the Bible used to refer to any period of time when God directly intervenes in human affairs---in judgment/ discipline/ wrath/ punishment – for the ultimate purpose of bringing the blessing of His salvation to the world.*

Keep this in mind as we look at **verse 15**. (This is the first time the phrase is found in Joel.)

Joel 1:15 ***“Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.”***

Joel is obviously referring here to the locust plague that has come upon Israel. He sees this divine intervention as ‘*the Day of the Lord*’. But let’s be honest—When Joel describes this day as a day of ‘*destruction from the Almighty*’, what do you feel? Do you react with horror? Do you say, “*How could a God of love do this?*”

But let me ask you another question—Wasn’t there anything in the heart, mind or attitude of Israel that needed to be destroyed? Of course there was! That’s why we must always see ‘the Day of the Lord’ as a day of blessing from God. Israel needed to be brought back to the Lord...for her own sake and for the sake of the world! She needed to be visited by God—She

needed a '*Day of the Lord*'!

...And so do we! I mean, aren't there things in your heart, or mind, or attitude that need to be destroyed? That's why the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is referred to, in the New Testament, as *the Day of the Lord*. In Him, God intervened in human affairs! Jesus came to purify as people for Himself! He came to make us holy in His blood!

But there's something even more interesting than this—According to the Bible, we are currently living in *the Day of the Lord*. As Jesus continues to purify a people for Himself, He deliberately takes us through seasons of discipline! Hebrews 12:5-11 says this:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?...Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Of course, the Bible also speaks of one final *Day of the Lord* ...a future intervention from God at the end of the Age; a Day when every heart will be laid bare and every human being will judged/disciplined/punished by God. But let me say that this Day of the Lord, like all the others, is not intended to destroy us, **but to destroy everything in us that is not of God**...anything that makes us less than the human beings He originally designed us to become.

In other words, it flows from the depths of God's love...out of His desire to redeem and restore His fallen creation.

Let's pray.

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