

Joel and the Day of the Lord
Sermon 2- A Day of Repentance!

Passages: Joel 2:11-27
Matthew 11:25-30

Last week, we opened our studies in the Prophet Joel by hearing about a successive wave of locust plagues in Israel that, literally, devoured the nation. Every living thing was affected!

Joel 1:4 *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.*

But, according to Joel, this plague was not simply another *natural* phenomenon-- it was not something that ‘Mother nature’ indiscriminately threw up in Israel’s face. No! It was a plague that came from God! Joel called it ‘the Day of the Lord’!

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

Clearly, it was God who initiated this devastation and who deliberately caused His people to suffer. And why would God do that to His people? If you remember our discussion last week, the answer to that question was found in the word ‘*discipline*’. As we saw last week, the locust plague was sent by God to *discipline* or *punish* Israel, not because God hated her, but because she was on a path of self-destruction! Israel had become a wayward bride, estranged from God’s love and cut-off from His life. And so, God deliberately used a locust plague to wake her up and bring her back to Him. For those with eyes to see, this terrible act of God’s wrath was, in fact, a wonderful act of His deep love for Israel!

Now, this leads us to a topic that I want us to focus on today. You see, this discipline of God meted out in love for Israel demanded a response from her—what the Bible generally refers to as ‘**repentance**’.

This is our subject for today. So, **let's pray.**

The Day of the Lord was meant to be a day of repentance. But, tell me, **what is repentance? How would you define the word?** I ask that question because many of us confuse *repentance* with *remorse*.

Remorse is when you *feel sorry* for something you've done. Here's an example: When you were a child and you did something wrong, (you broke Aunt Betty's precious vase) you were immediately told by your parents to apologize. You were being asked to show *remorse*—to show how sorry you were for what you did. In fact, it was *remorse* that got you off the hook! Because you were too young to fix the problem you caused, it was only *remorse* that could restore your relationship with Aunt Betty.

Sadly, this idea has been transferred into our relationship with God. When we sin against Him, our immediate reaction is to show remorse...to grovel in confession and chest-beating in an attempt to show Him how sorry we are. We do this when we say the General Confession. "*We acknowledge with shame the sins we have committed...We earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for all our misdoings.*" That's basically *remorse*. Far worse, however, is the Catholic Church which has developed an elaborate ritual known as *penance*. When you go to confession, the priest tells you exactly how much remorse you need to show God by reciting a long list of 'Our Fathers' and 'Hail Marys'.

But...*remorse* is not *repentance*! In both Old and New Testaments, repentance is basically '*the process of changing direction*'...of turning away from evil/sin and turning back to God. Sure, there may be personal feelings of remorse, but the primary focus of repentance is not on how you feel but on what you must do in light of God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

This is the basic idea in Joel. God didn't simply want Israel to feel bad about her sin. He wanted much more than that-- He wanted her to totally change direction! Look at verse 12- "***Even now, return to me...***"

But, of course, **changing direction is actually a two-step process.** **First**, you need a jolt...something to wake you up to the fact that you're heading the wrong way. Israel needed to be jolted out of her complacency and self-assuredness. That's why God sent the locusts; to undermine Israel's self-confidence! Only then would she be free to turn away from trusting in

herself. But, remember, this was just the first step of her repentance.

In the **second** step of repentance, Israel needed something to turn to... Someone else to trust in! Without this object of trust, she couldn't repent—to change directions would have been too fearful. That's why God reached out His hand and, in His great love, offered Israel a new vision of life. Only in this way could Israel's repentance be completed as God drew Israel back into His arms.

When we say that repentance is a two-step movement, you need to see it as the Bible does...as a movement from Death to Life...from Decay to Resurrection...from old life to new life. Once you start to see this, you'll soon discover that **repentance** is one of the biggest and most comprehensive themes of the entire Bible! On every page, there seems to be a story of someone being taken down into *death* so that *resurrection* might come.

In the story of Noah, the flood of death leads to a rainbow of life.

In the story of Abraham and Sarah, a barren woman and an impotent man, both 'dead', give birth to a baby boy.

In the story of Joseph, a dead son thrown down a well is raised to new life as Prince of Egypt.

In the story of Israel in the wilderness, her 40-year long death is followed by a resurrection life in the Promised Land

And today, in the Book of Joel, we read the story of how Israel's death by locusts brings the possibility of resurrection in a land bursting forth with fruitfulness!

But, of course, we must not rush through the story. You see, the question we are confronted with in today's passage is this: **'Has Israel truly died yet?'** Has the locust plague really done its work? Has Israel truly given up trusting in herself? Is she ready to turn to God with all her heart, soul, mind and strength and be raised up in His resurrection?

I don't think so! You see, in today's passage, God seems to be saying to Israel, "*You're almost there. Now, let **me** help you to really die!*"

Look at Joel 2:12-13a.

12 *“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments.”*

Do you understand why does God is calling Israel to ‘*fast and weep and mourn*’? Those who’ve been taught that *repentance* is the same as *remorse* will say that *fasting and mourning and weeping* are necessary signs to God that you really are sorry for your sins! (“*God, Look at how sorry we are!*”) ..as if God needs our self-flagellation as proof of our sincerity! In fact, some will even tell you that God can only forgive us when we show Him this level of *remorse*.

Not only do I disagree with the theology behind that idea, I don’t think that’s what this passage is saying! As I understand it, these three things... *fasting, mourning and weeping*... were not to be signs of Israel’s *remorse* —they were to be signs of her own *death*; the death of her dreams, her hopes, and her self-reliance. Think about it:

When I fast, I am denying myself the basics of life—food and water. By fasting, I’m saying “*I am dead!*”, particularly when I accompany it with dressing in sackcloth and ashes. “*I am but a dead corpse!*”

When I weep, I’m displaying my broken heart...broken by an acknowledgment of the depth of my own corruption and the absence of life in me.

When I mourn, I am expressing the grief that comes from the realisation that my old ways of life are no more. They are dead. I am dead!

When I rend my garments, it is also about being in a state of grief. To rend my heart is paramount to entering into the grave myself.

But God’s call for Israel to die didn’t end there. This corporate call continues in **verses 15-17**.

15 *Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly.*

16 *Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders,
gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom*

leave his room and the bride her chamber.¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?' "

In these verses, God calls the entire nation to die through a corporate act of humiliation. Go is calling for the death of their national pride! As the people came together, they would be accepting their death as a nation. Even the new-born child, nursing at his mother's breast, would be considered as dead. Even the newly married couple whose life was just beginning would consider themselves as dead. All festivities would be stopped. Weeping and mourning and fasting were the order of the day. **The pall of death would cover the land.**

As I said earlier, repentance (changing direction) is actually a two-step process.

First, you need a jolt... something to wake you up to the fact that you're heading the wrong way. That's why God sent the locusts; to undermine Israel's self-confidence and bring her to death! But this was just the first step of repentance.

In the **second** step of repentance, Israel needed something to turn to... Someone to trust in! She needed to feel safe and secure as she made the change in directions.

That's why God's love is so important! The only way a person will allow themselves to die to self is when they know that God loves them! And that's why God's love is such a serious element in Joel's prophecy! Go back to verse 13 of chapter 2.

13 "Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love..."

Of course, this was not a new concept about God. Indeed, this exact same description of God (almost word for word) is found several times 6 or 7 times in the Old Testament. In **Exodus 34**, for example, after the incident of the Golden Calf, God speaks to Moses. Of course, He wanted Israel to repent...to change directions...but listen to how He prefaced his call to repentance:

Ex 34:-75 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with

him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”

Notice the emphasis on the depth of God’s love! Listen to all those adjectives: ‘*compassionate*’, ‘*gracious*’, ‘*slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness*’, ‘*...forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*’ God knows that Israel’s repentance will only happen when she is confident in God and can put her faith in His love. She will not die to self unless she has the hope of a resurrection.

A similar thing can be said of King David. After David’s notorious sin with Bathsheba, he wrote Psalm 103, probably the best known of David’s Psalms. In it, he tells us that his own repentance happened because he was convinced of God’s love for him. *Ps 103:8-10 “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”*

Although repentance is a 2-step process of death and resurrection, those two steps are rooted and grounded in God’s love. That’s what we see in the Book of Joel! In fact, as God calls Israel to **death**, not only does He reassure her of His love, but He even paints a glorious picture of her **resurrection**. Here’s what it looks like, starting from verse 19.

*19-24 The LORD will reply to them: “I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully;”... “Surely he has done great things. **Be not afraid**, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things. **Be not afraid**, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. **Be glad**, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness.*

He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.”

In other words, ‘Do not fear your death, O Israel. For I will raise you up again!’ In fact, God even makes a promise to Israel that, if she allows herself to die through the death that He brings to her, He will make her resurrection more glorious than anything they’d ever experienced before! Listen to His promise in verses 25-27:

“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten— the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm [HYPERLINK "http://biblia.com/books/niv/article/PER.29.2.18"](http://biblia.com/books/niv/article/PER.29.2.18) \l "footnote5"^f— my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed.
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.

In these last two verses, the same refrain is repeated: “Never again will my people be shamed.” Why is that? Because in ancient Israel, as with most Eastern countries today, shame was probably the biggest fear of a person’s life—the fear of ‘losing face’. Shame was about losing one’s honour or reputation in the community. So why does God say to Israel, “Never again will my people be shamed.”? Two reasons:

Death brings an end to personal shame. Once you’re dead, there is no more argument about your reputation or honour. There is no more shame!

Resurrection means that your life is no longer found in yourself but in God who raised you. (Paul says that “*Your life is hid with God in Christ.*”) This means that it’s all about His reputation, His honour, His glory...things that cannot be undisputed! In Him, there is no more shame!

The New Testament correlations are so clear. When Jesus calls us, saying,

“Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest...” what He is asking of us is to repent! That doesn’t mean to feel sorry for our sins, but to die to ourselves and allow Him to raise us up in His life. Don’t feel ashamed of this repentance-- rather, be glad! For it’s a total change of direction **from** a life that has been self-focused, self-confident, self-absorbed (and because it all revolves around us, it’s a life that’s **weary and burdened**), **to** a life that is crucified in Christ and raised in His resurrection.

Indeed, this is why Jesus died and rose again—He died to help us repent! He died to meet us in our death and to help us truly die to self. He, then, rose from the dead to lift us up from our death and find new life in Him. This is how the Apostle Paul spoke about his own repentance:

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Can you say the same thing? **Let’s pray.**