

Joel and the Day of the Lord *Sermon 3- A Day of Fire!*

Passages: Joel 2:28-32
Matthew 3:4-12

“What in the world is God doing?” Have you ever asked this question?

Some people believe that God’s main interest in this world is to make people happy. They believe He wants to heal us...forgive us...and make life easier for us. Robert Wuthnow, an American theologian, made this comment about modern spirituality: *“If it helps me find a vacant parking space, I know my spirituality is on the right track. (But) if it leads me into the wilderness, calling me to face dangers that would rather not deal with, then it is a form of spirituality I am unlikely to choose.”*

In other words, people tend to approach God from a consumer mentality... as if God’s only role is to serve us and to meet our needs; to make us feel better about ourselves and to help us avoid suffering.

Of course, all you have to do is read the **Book of Joel** to see how far from the truth is this idea of God! What, according to Joel, is God’s main desire? Clearly, what He wants it is to purify for Himself a people...a people who will live righteously in His world and who will work with Him to establish His righteousness throughout the whole earth...even if that means suffering!

And that’s why we need to study this book of Joel! That’s why we need to hear about the Day of the Lord which, as we have seen so far, is (1) a ***Day of Discipline*** and (2) a ***Day of Repentance***. As we shall see today, the Day of the Lord is also a ***Day of Fire!***

Let’s pray.

Do you like fire? I once knew a boy who was so fascinated by fire that he lit matches in his parents’ bedroom... and burnt the entire house 2-storey house down to the ground! Yes, fire can be fascinating; indeed, fire can be very useful to us, for giving us light and warmth and for cooking our food.

But, fire can also be very dangerous!

Today, we need to talk about fire; particularly the dangerous aspects of it. For, you see, today's passage is primarily about the Holy Spirit. In verses 28 and 29, God makes this incredible pronouncement: ***"I will pour out My Spirit..."*** At first, this may sound wonderful to us—after all, isn't the Holy Spirit known as *the Comforter*????! But we need to remember that, throughout the Biblical record, the Holy Spirit is (more often than not) associated with fire: divine, cleansing fire! The fire of purification! The fire of sanctification! Dangerous indeed!

Just think about the fire that appeared to Moses in the burning bush. Or think about the fiery presence of God that went in front of the Tabernacle by night. Think about the glorious fire that filled the Tent of Meeting and brought the people to their knees, or the ritual of burnt offerings, and how the fire fell from heaven to consume them. Think about the fire that came in the form of a lightning bolt and consumed certain evil men in Israel. In every case, the people trembled. They knew that the fire of the Holy Spirit was dangerous!

Interestingly, the locust plague that we've been hearing about in the Book of Joel is also described as a *fire*. In Joel 1:19, Joel declares: ***"To you, O LORD, I call, for fire has devoured the open pastures and flames have burned up all the trees of the field. Even the wild animals pant for you; the streams of water have dried up and fire has devoured the open pastures."***

Looking back over the Old Testament, the Book of Hebrews holds no punches when it says, ***"Our God is a consuming fire!"*** (Hebrews 12:29). Back in Isaiah 4:4, the Holy Spirit was even given the title, ***"the Spirit of burning"***!

Now, does all this talk of fire make you worry? Does it cause you fear the Holy Spirit? It should! And yet, at the same time, there is really nothing to fear! I say that because the fire of the Holy Spirit comes only with a very specific purpose to fulfil. It may sound contradictory, but His destructive power was always designed to bring new life ...to God's people (and, ultimately, to the world)! You see, the chief role of the Holy Spirit was

(and still is!) to burn away everything that hinders, and strangles, and corrupts our life-giving relationship with God, the Creator of the Universe! In other words, His fire is a good fire!

Now, surely this image of *a good fire* is easy to understand for Australians! We've all seen places where a bushfire has gone through and ravaged the landscape. Everything looks hopelessly destroyed, as if it could never again produce a single blade of new growth. But then, miraculously, six months later, after a good rain, the land comes alive again, more productive than it was before! In the end, *the fire has brought renewal!*

This is what the Bible is speaking about whenever it talks about the Holy Spirit as a *consuming fire*. His fire is for our good!

So, with all this in mind, we can now approach today's passage in **Joel 2**. You see, when Joel gives this prophecy about the Holy Spirit being "***poured out on all flesh***", we must understand that this is not about making people happy, or more fulfilled, or to clear away their troubles. Nor would the Holy Spirit be given so that the people might have some spiritual gifts with which to amuse themselves.

No, the Spirit of God would be primarily poured out on all flesh in the context of God's judgment and salvation—He would come **to save us from ourselves** by burning away the dross of our selfish ambitions and self-centred perspective on life. He would come to liberate us from our cosy and comfortable existence and to expand our horizons... that we might eventually be able to love as selflessly as God loves!

Look at verse 28. Why does Joel tell us that, on the Day of the Holy Spirit's coming, "***Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.***" ?? This is not so much about supernatural gifts as it is about supernatural cleansing. As the fire of the Spirit *burns away* the veil over our eyes, and as the ropes of deceit that hold us down are melted, the Spirit will release us into new dreams and visions of life! Our eyes will be opened and we'll be freed from our old, narrow view of the world. He will also loosen our tongues in prophecy that we might extol the present truth of His great and sovereign plans for this world...to recreate it in righteousness and fill the earth with people who (like God, and in His image) are selfless in their love for others.

His fire is good fire...burning up self-interest and corruption. And those who allow the fire to burn away the chaff will find a new life, a new hope, a new perspective, and a new desire to serve!

Now, it's a good place to pause for a second and take stock of ourselves. Ask yourself, "Have I been playing a game of comfortable Christianity with God? Or, am I willing to invite the fire of the Holy Spirit deeply in to my life to destroy everything that needs destroying? God has poured out His Spirit on all flesh for this very purpose!!!

But those who refuse to allow the fire of the Holy Spirit into their lives... those who, according to Jesus, '*blaspheme against the Holy Spirit*' or who, in Paul's words, '*resist the Holy Spirit*' ...will find that they must face an even greater fire. In other words, if you don't allow this Day of the Lord... this Day of Fire...to consume the impurities of your life, then God will need to take you through another Day of the Lord...another Day of Fire at the end of time. It's what Joel describes (in verse 31) as "***the great and dreadful day of the Lord!***"

Listen again to verses 30-31. "***I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.***"

As I said, this future Day of the Lord doesn't have to be a dreadful day...if we respond to God's fire **now!** That's why Joel speaks so confidently in verse 32 about God's great patience and His ongoing offer of grace to those who call on His name. To be cleansed by the **present** fire...the present Day of the Lord...means there will be little to burn up in the **future!** "***And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.***"

I hope you can see the full picture that is on view here. The locust plague that God sent on His people was designed to burn up all that Israel put her trust in! Now that her wealth and prosperity are gone...now that her self-centred view of the world has gone up in smoke...she is ready for a new

beginning! The

fire of the Spirit's destruction will be followed by the fire of renewal! Mount Zion will be raised up out of the ashes and be empowered with a whole

new vision of reality and a God-given responsibility towards the world.

According to verse 32 of Joel's prophecy, Mount Zion will again become the centre of the universe from which God's blessings of salvation will flow out to the world. The *survivors* of the Holy Spirit's cleansing fire will become the mediators of salvation to the nations!

So, let's fast-forward in time. Has Joel's prophecy been fulfilled? Take a look at **Matthew 3:11-12**.

When we come to the New Testament, we discover that the fire of the Holy Spirit is tightly linked to Christ and his work of salvation! Listen again to what John the Baptist said: ***"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*** John could see that the Messiah's salvation was tied directly to the fire of the Holy Spirit! Only the people who willingly went through the baptism of the Holy Spirit's *unquenchable fire* would ultimately be saved!

And this is exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost! Acts 2 tells us that, after His ascension, Jesus sent the fire of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. As *tongues of fire* alighted on their heads, they spoke in other tongues! The fire was given to *purify* their lives. The Holy Spirit was sent as God's agent of sanctification. And that's why Peter quotes from today's passage in Joel! Peter was announcing to the assembled crowd that the fire had finally come! The church of Jesus Christ was being born out of the ashes of the Holy Spirit's fire in order to take her place as the New Jerusalem and as the new centre of the universe! From now on, Jesus, through His church, was going to call the entire world to open themselves up to the rigours of God's cleansing and purification.

Peter's sermon had an immediate impact!

Look at Acts 2:37.

Ac 2:37-41 *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

But that’s not the end of the story! As the Holy Spirit began to burn away the chaff of their selfishness, greed, arrogance and pride, there’s a group of people in Jerusalem who have been thoroughly renewed from the inside out!

Verses 42-47.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

The Day of the Lord is a Day of Fire! And as the church expands throughout the world, we must always remember—the Holy Spirit was not simply poured out to make our lives easier or to make us feel better about ourselves. He was given as fire from heaven! Let us, therefore, continually offer our lives to Him as living sacrifices, that any remaining dross in us might be consumed by the fire of God’s Spirit.

The Day of the Lord-- a day of fire.

Allow me to finish with a poem from Charles Wesley.

***O Thou Who camest from above,
The pure celestial fire to impart,***

***Kindle a flame of sacred love
Upon the mean altar of my heart.***

***There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.***

***Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
To work and speak and think for Thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up Thy gift in me.***

***Ready for all Thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
'Til death Thy endless mercies seal,
And make my sacrifice complete.***