

“Return to Me”

JOEL 2:12-13

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
August 12, 2012**



This morning I would invite you to turn with me to the Old Testament book of Joel as we consider an encouraging passage that comes right in the middle of a terrifying book. In our pew Bibles, the book of Joel is found on page 1428, and it is located in the Minor Prophets, a group of 12 books at the end of the Old Testament. As far as a date is concerned, it is difficult to nail it down, but we do know that the book was written in response to a devastating catastrophe. I would refer to it as a “natural disaster,” and yet there was nothing really natural about it.

The people had apparently drifted away from God, they had let things slip over time, and God decided to get their attention by sending a devastating plague of locusts. I know we look around us today, and we see the kind of damage that a drought can do. Food prices are on the rise. Not only that, but since we burn our food in the form of ethanol, we also see the price of fuel going up again. So, a lot of people are being affected by the drought we’re in, but the devastation in the book of Joel is a whole lot worse than anything any of us have ever seen. We’ll do a little survey of the damage in just a moment, but by way of introduction, please notice how the book of Joel starts, please notice who is addressed here, and please notice how bad it is, starting in Joel 1:1,

- 1 *The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel:***
- 2 *Hear this, O elders,
And listen, all inhabitants of the land.
Has anything like this happened in your days
Or in your fathers’ days?***
- 3 *Tell your sons about it,
And let your sons tell their sons,
And their sons the next generation.***
- 4 *What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten;
And what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten;
And what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten.***

And so we find that the book is addressed first of all, to the elders, to the religious leaders, to those who should have been leading the nation, and to these men, the Lord starts this book with a question, with

something these men needed to think about: Have you ever seen anything like this before? In other words, they needed to snap out of it and realize that this was not normal, that this was not natural, that this was, in fact, a punishment and not an accident!

In verse 4, we have just a brief summary of what was happening – the locusts came in swarms of various forms, and they would leave a trail of nothing! But what I find interesting is that the book is not just addressed to the religious leaders. Notice what happens starting in verse 5,

- 5** *Awake, drunkards, and weep;
And wail, all you wine drinkers,
On account of the sweet wine
That is cut off from your mouth.*
- 6** *For a nation has invaded my land,
Mighty and without number;
Its teeth are the teeth of a lion,
And it has the fangs of a lioness.*
- 7** *It has made my vine a waste
And my fig tree splinters.
It has stripped them bare and cast them away;
Their branches have become white.*

And I love the way the NIV puts it in verse 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.”*** When I read that again in my office this week, I had the picture in my mind of a big burly guy sitting at a bar. In fact, I thought about a guy who sat right next to us as we were camping in SE Utah several weeks ago. I’ll admit it: I was admiring this guy’s leather chaps, so I took a picture (I thought my family would kill me for doing this). But he was one tough dude! And then when I read verse 5 this week, I thought of this guy, and I can just imagine this guy taking a drink right as some other guy walks up snatches that drink out of his hand! Can you imagine what might happen? But back in Joel’s time, the guy might ask, “Who did that?” And God says: I did that! I’m the one who has snatched the drink from your lips! God is saying: I am the one who has invaded your land! Notice in verse 6, the teeth of the locusts are like the teeth of a lion, and those teeth had destroyed the vineyards, effectively snatching the wine out of the hands of the drunkards – taking it away!

In the rest of Chapter 1, the young married couples are told to mourn, the priests are told to mourn. The situation is so bad that there is no longer anything left to offer to God for a sacrifice. The fields and vineyards are destroyed, the orchards are decimated, the storehouses are empty, the cattle are wandering aimlessly, the sheep are suffering – everything is basically gone! The locusts have destroyed just about everything – they march through like soldiers and leave nothing untouched. Notice the opening verses of Joel 2 as the locusts are compared to an invading army. Starting in Joel 2:1, the prophet says,

- 1** *Blow a trumpet in Zion,
And sound an alarm on My holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
For the day of the Lord is coming;
Surely it is near,*
- 2** *A day of darkness and gloom,
A day of clouds and thick darkness.*

*As the dawn is spread over the mountains,
So there is a great and mighty people;
There has never been anything like it,
Nor will there be again after it
To the years of many generations.*

- 3** *A fire consumes before them
And behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them
But a desolate wilderness behind them,
And nothing at all escapes them.*
- 4** *Their appearance is like the appearance of horses;
And like war horses, so they run.*
- 5** *With a noise as of chariots
They leap on the tops of the mountains,
Like the crackling of a flame of fire consuming the stubble,
Like a mighty people arranged for battle.*
- 6** *Before them the people are in anguish;
All faces turn pale.*
- 7** *They run like mighty men,
They climb the wall like soldiers;
And they each march in line,
Nor do they deviate from their paths.*
- 8** *They do not crowd each other,
They march everyone in his path;
When they burst through the defenses,
They do not break ranks.*
- 9** *They rush on the city,
They run on the wall;
They climb into the houses,
They enter through the windows like a thief.*
- 10** *Before them the earth quakes,
The heavens tremble,
The sun and the moon grow dark
And the stars lose their brightness.*
- 11** *The Lord utters His voice before His army;
Surely His camp is very great,
For strong is he who carries out His word.
The day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome,
And who can endure it?*

Back up in verse 3, notice that as the locusts come through, the land looks like the Garden of Eden in front of them, but on the backside they leave a desolate wilderness. They move like a wildfire. On our recent trip to Colorado, we saw some of the devastation caused by the wildfires out there. In my mind, I imagined that the hills would be black, but they were not black; instead, the hills and mountains were bare – the fires moved so quickly they just vaporized the foliage and left nothing behind – not even a smudge! That is what the locusts were doing. They even sound like the crackling of a flame. They do not break rank, but they march right through a house – up the wall, in one window and out the other side. Maybe you remember a similar scene

from one of the *Little House on the Prairie* books. Going back up to verse 11, we are reminded that these little critters are God's soldiers, carrying out God's will, and with that, Joel asks (at the end of verse 11), "***the day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?***" "***Who can endure it?***" With that, we come to the main point of the entire book of Joel, two of the most encouraging verses in the Old Testament. For the remainder of our time together this morning, I would like for us to focus our thoughts on Joel 2:12-13. And in light of all of the destruction that we've read about up to this point, let us please notice what comes next – Joel 2:12-13,

12 *"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "Return to Me with all your heart,
And with fasting, weeping and mourning;*

13 *And rend your heart and not your garments."*

Now return to the Lord your God,

For He is gracious and compassionate,

Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.

- I. **There are two things I'd like to point out in this passage, starting with the fact that MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, GOD WANTS OUR HEARTS.**

And at first, we might be tempted to say, "Wait a minute! This passage doesn't really apply to us! We are not like those people! Our hearts are not far away from God!" And I am certainly not saying that we are in their situation, but let's think about this a little bit. Even when it comes to those of us who have been Christians for many years, is it possible that we have drifted just a little bit from the enthusiasm we had when we first obeyed the gospel? Is that a possibility? I want to share one example of something that I enjoy in my own life, and that is, television. Maybe television isn't your thing. Maybe it's some other kind of screen time. I won't embarrass anybody, but I talked to one teenager lately who said he hasn't watched any network TV for several years – years! But let's just take television as an example. Recent statistics have shown that the average person claiming to be a Christian spends well less than one hour a week reading the word of God. The same study, though, discovered that the same person spends between 15-20 hours watching television each week. Now, watching TV is not necessarily bad – sometimes I need a good episode of NCIS to help me relax a little bit – but do we see a problem when an average person claiming to be a Christian regularly spends more time watching TV in one night than they spend reading the word of God in six months? Is it possible that such a person in that situation has perhaps drifted away from God?

With that in mind as a concern, then, let us please notice what God really wants - more than anything else, God wants our hearts! If He is not in first place, or if there is something we're doing that God doesn't want us to do, God wants us to return. If we've drifted through the years, if we've sinned in some horrible way or even if we've just let our priorities slip a little bit – no matter what we've done, God wants us back! And please notice, whether we tear our clothes or not is not the issue! Back in ancient times, when people were sorry or sad about something, they would tear their clothes. But over time, when confronted with sin, the people would tear their clothes without really changing their hearts – almost like a kid who says "sorry" only because his mom is forcing him to say "sorry" – it's not the saying of "sorry" that matters. What matters is that our hearts are sorry. What matters is that we fix the problem. What matters is that we are torn up on the inside to the point we actually do something about it.

Just this past Friday I ran across a story on CNN about a situation with an airline up in Alaska. For whatever reason, one of the wings had some damage – there was a chunk missing! And as you can imagine, that caused a little bit of concern among the passengers, to look out and see a chunk missing. So (and you can see the

picture online), one of the mechanics took out a big fat marker and wrote a note right there on the wing, “We know about this,” and then he drew an arrow to the gaping hole in the wing! Let’s apply that spiritually: What if we’re sinning and we just tell God, “Yeah, I know! I’ve got a problem in this area!” Well, that is certainly a good start, but what God really wants is for us to return. He wants us to work it out. He wants us to come back.

And notice in verse 12, God says that we are to come back to Him with **“all”** of our heart. It’s either all or nothing. We cannot come close to God while trying to wall off a little section in our minds where God is not allowed. “God, you can have just about all of me. You can have me on Sunday morning and all that. But there is this thing in my life that I am not quite ready to give up. I’m giving you most of me, but you can’t have that.” That, of course, will not work. As the Lord said in verse 12, He wants **“all”** of our heart.

And then notice verse 13: The Lord goes on to say that He wants us to rip our hearts and not our clothing. In the ancient world, of course (as I said before), people would tear their clothing to show that they were torn up on the inside over something. But the Lord says that instead of ripping our clothing, He wants us to tear our hearts. When we sin, He wants us to be torn up on the inside. He doesn’t care about the clothing – He wants the heart, and He wants all of it!

It’s kind of like when we get married. When we make those vows, we pledge everything to the other person. But imagine going to a wedding. Picture a bride and groom standing up here at the front. Imagine we are going through the vows. What if I said: Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together after God’s law; to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, in prosperity and adversity, forsaking all others, except on Thursday? How many grooms do you think might say, “I do” to that? That would be a dangerous thing! And yet when we think about it, that is the way some people try to give their lives to God! They want to give everything...except for this one little part over here. But God wants everything.

More than anything, God wants our hearts, and more than any outward display, God wants us torn up on the inside. He wants us to come back.

II. There is a second main point I’d like for us to notice in these two verses, and it goes back to the REASON why God wants our hearts – the reason is: GOD IS GRACIOUS AND COMPASSIONATE!

Notice in verse 13, we are to return to the Lord our God, **“For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.”** So if we can imagine this: The people are in the middle of this horrendous locust attack, every green thing is being obliterated, the nation is being ravaged, and in the middle of this, **“Even now,”** Joel says, God wants our hearts because He is **“gracious and compassionate.”**

Notice at the end of verse 13, we find that the Lord God is described as **“relenting of evil.”** Literally, that little phrase doesn’t mean that God is sorry for doing something wrong, we are not talking about something immoral here, but it refers to the idea that God is torn up over what He had to do to get the attention of His people. He wasn’t thrilled about sending an army of locusts to eat every living thing, but He felt bad about it, He was sorry He had to do it. The word **“evil”** can also be translated as **“misery, distress, injury, adversity, calamity, or disaster.”** The Lord God, then, felt bad about the punishment, but He knew that it was something that had to be done. The goal in all of this was to get the people to come back.

And if this is true of the situation back in Joel's time, how much more is it true of our situation today! If we today have drifted away from God, let's think for just a moment about everything God went through to make it possible for us to come back. Instead of sending some kind of calamity or plague, we know what God sent today – He sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. God allowed His own Son to suffer and die in our place. Yes, there is a punishment hanging out there on the horizon, but the Lord has allowed His Son to take the punishment for sin in our place. To me, that is motivating!

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, ***“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”*** How did God make that reconciliation possible? How did God make it possible for us to come back? Paul goes on to say in verse 21, ***“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”*** In other words, God allowed His innocent Son to take on the sins of this world – every sin ever committed. God has done something absolutely amazing in order to bring His children back to Him. He's done something we can hardly even understand. In that song that we've been singing lately, “How deep the Father's love for us! How vast beyond all measure! That He should give His only Son to make a wretch His treasure!” Yes, as Joel says, the Lord God is ***“gracious and compassionate, slow to anger [and] abounding in lovingkindness.”***

Conclusion:

This morning we have considered two verses in the Old Testament book of Joel, verses that were probably written more than 2500 years ago. We have learned from those verses that more than anything, God wants our hearts. If we've never obeyed the gospel, God wants us. If we have obeyed the gospel in the past but we've drifted, God wants us back. He wants us to readjust our priorities. And then we've also been reminded this morning that God wants us back because He is ***“gracious and compassionate.”*** He cares about us and wants us to live with Him forever.

We accept the Lord's offer by turning away from sin, by confessing Jesus as His Son, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins can be forgiven. If you have any questions at all, we would encourage you to study with us this afternoon. If you are already a Christian and you've drifted and need the prayers of this congregation to help you get back on track, we would invite you to write your concern down and bring it to the front – we will share it with the church and then go to God in prayer together as a congregation. If you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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