

Ash Wednesday; February 14, 2024

Joel 2:12-1

“Return to Him with All Your Heart”

**Even now, declares the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and grief.
Tear your heart and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in mercy,
and he relents from sending disaster.
Who knows?
He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing --
grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.
Blow the ram’s horn in Zion.
Set aside a day for fasting.
Call a solemn convocation.
Gather the people.
Consecrate the assembly.
Bring together the elders.
Gather the children, even those nursing at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.
Let the priests, who minister before the LORD,
weep between the temple porch and the altar.
Let them say:
 **Have compassion on your people, O LORD.
 Do not subject the inheritance you have given to the scorn of the nations.
 Do not make us notorious among the nations as the object of ridicule.
 Why should they say among the peoples,
 “Where is their God?”****

By the time the prophet Joel writes his little book, the nation of Israel has been in open rebellion against the Lord for generations. Israel’s kings have led the Lord’s chosen into open idolatry; the Lord’s Word had been ignored, and his worship stolen. There is always a faithful few in Israel, but their number is dwarfed by the rebels. Joel comes to get their attention. He speaks of a plague of locusts that will come on the land if the people do not turn back to the Lord. There is nothing scarier to a mostly agrarian nation than locusts, which thoroughly destroy entire harvests, leaving nothing good behind – except if the threat is figurative, and Joel is actually threatening a military invasion by a nation like Assyria, that destroys entire nations and leaves nothing behind. It could be one or the other, or both. Either way, devastation is coming, unless the Israelites turn back to the Lord.

And you might think it’s too late. Joel is not the first to warn them. The Lord is always sending prophets to insist on repentance from his people, and they are met mostly with covered ears and hard hearts. But the very first words we hear from Joel tells us that even now, even after all this time, even after all this

rebellion it's not too late to turn back to the Lord. And ultimately, it's not Joel who declares there's still time; it's the Lord himself: **Even now, declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and grief.**

If your heart is still beating, it's not too late for you. Even now, declares the Lord, return to him with all your heart. It does not matter what you have done wrong or failed to do right in your life. The call to repent, to turn back to the Lord, is for you. As long as you are alive, there is time even now. There is also time for everyone around you. We are not in a place to label anyone beyond hope, to call them beyond the Lord's call to turn back in repentance.

But the fact that there is still time does not mean there is time to wait. There is urgency in Joel's call. **Blow the ram's horn in Zion. Set aside a day for fasting. Call a solemn convocation. Gather the people. Consecrate the assembly.** In rapid succession, five times in a row, Joel says do it. Don't wait. Return to the Lord with all your heart, and do it now.

It's not too late for anyone. But no one is exempt from this urgent call, either. **Bring together the elders.** Are you elderly? It's for you. **Gather the children, even those nursing at the breast.** Even infants are not innocent. **Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.** Are you in the middle of your honeymoon? Tough. You also need to return to the Lord with all your heart. Are you busy, right in the middle of everything, too busy to listen and return to the Lord? If you think so, you lie to yourself. Your eternal fate depends on it; you cannot be too busy for it. **Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the temple porch and the altar.** Many of Israel's priests were indulgent and lazy. Some had turned away from their work in the temple to work for other gods. But these are the priests, the holy people, who are still there, working for the Lord, praying and sacrificing. These are the "men of God." They, too, are sinners who must return to the Lord with all their heart. Everyone must listen and return with all their heart.

If you're listening, why? If you're not, what will move you to listen and return with all your heart? It is first knowing that your sin against the will of God, revealed in the Scriptures, results in destruction. Destruction was coming for Israel, in the form of insects and armies both, probably. Destruction is coming to everyone who has rebelled against God with sin. And it is eternal. This is the frightening truth that God uses to open ears to his call for every sinner and return with all their heart.

But ultimately that truth is not what he uses to turn us. Who would turn back to a God who only threatens destruction for sin? If that's where his Word ends, you may as well take the advice of Job's wife: "Curse God and die." That is not where his Word ends. It continues with the truth powerful enough to turn those dead in sin to the Lord, and to keep those alive in faith returning to him: **Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and he relents from sending disaster. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing.** Who knows? We know. We know God's grace and compassion, because we have seen it in our Lord Jesus, to whom Joel and all the prophets looked ahead. We have seen grace upon grace in Jesus' work. Grace is love undeserved, and that is what we have from God in his Son.

Underserved love from God sent Jesus from the Father's side to the virgin's womb and into the manger. Underserved love lived every day in perfect obedience to all of his Father's commands, so that the righteous robe of his life would cover the filth of our sin. Underserved love led him to suffer under Pontius Pilate, to bleed and die under the Father's wrath, so that we will not suffer the wrath of hell. Underserved

love brought him out of the grave to give us the confidence that we will rise free from sin and all its ill effects. Undeserved love fills our ears and eyes and mouths with the love of Christ so that we know it and believe it.

God's grace turns us. Joel's audience had the promise. We have seen its reality, its full power to turn us to God with all our hearts.

In the Old Testament, when people repented, they had some ways of showing it that may seem strange to us: wearing sackcloth, sitting in ashes, weeping, and fasting. We tend to be less expressive, and God does not command New Testament Christians to do any of these things to display their repentance. You can if you want to, but you don't have to. We even need to be careful when we speak of being sorry for sin as if there's some threshold of sorrow that must be reached, a minimum amount of grief that must seize the heart, a certain number of tears that must be shed. God knows the heart, and he knows where Godly sorrow lies, which is simply regret that I have offended him with my sin.

On the other hand, we should not be surprised if at some points along the way we do find some sin so awful, so shameful in our lives, that the sorrow of the heart does spill over into physical displays and emotional distress. We don't need to judge ourselves or others as being overly dramatic if that happens, either. But we should not feel like we're not truly sorry if it doesn't happen. The important thing is that God's law produces regret in the soul that we have sinned.

And the even more important thing is that God's gracious forgiveness turns us to him to unburden all the sorrow and guilt of our heart. We are free to place it all at Jesus' cross, every day. What a wonderful God we have, who calls us to turn with all our hearts to Jesus' cross and let our sin die there, to turn to Jesus' empty tomb and rise with him each day.

While God does not require New Testament Christians to prove their sorrow with outward displays, he does tell us to show that we have returned to him with all our hearts by showing the fruits of repentance. When I am sorry for my sin and have turned to God for grace, I will then turn back to that sin and say, "No more. My thefts have grieved me, and I have received God's grace. The money will go back and the stealing will stop." Or, if it is a God-pleasing thing I have been neglecting I will say, "More. My lack of love for my neighbor is a sin that I have repented of. Now there will be more." We show we are sorry for our sins and have received forgiveness – that's repentance – by producing the fruits of repentance. So, tonight, look at your life. What stands out as needing to change, to come in line with God's will? Show that you have returned to God with all your heart.

And here is more beauty: God's gracious forgiveness is the most powerful force to change us for the better. Remember this when the opportunity to thrive, or the chance to love your neighbor, comes around again: My Lord is gracious and compassionate, and he has been to me. And pray: "Dear Lord, in your love, help me produce this fruit." You will overcome sins and keep his commands to prove your repentance.

Finally, the Lord promises to bless those who return to him with all their hearts: **Do not subject the inheritance you have given us to the scorn of the nations. Do not make us notorious among the nations as an object of ridicule. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God?"** Joel was promising that the Lord would reward repentant Israel with relief and rescue from disaster: **he relents from sending disaster.** God bless us all who return to him with all their hearts. You are blessed with the

promise of heaven and the forgiveness of your sins; God has relented from sending you disaster. You are blessed with a life where you need to carry no guilt for your sins, because Christ has washed them away. You are blessed to live knowing where you stand with God, and will stand with him forever. God promises to bless his believers richly. It may also come in the form of material wealth, or it may not. It may come in the form of children or friendships or career success. Or it may come in the form of a life sparsely blessed here, but richly rewarded in heaven, like Lazarus. But however he chooses to do it, and in whatever combination, he blesses richly all who return to him with all their hearts.

Even now, declares the LORD, elders, children, those nursing, bridegrooms and brides, return to the LORD, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy. Amen.