

August 17, 2025

Return: A Merciful God

Joel 2:12-27

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction... Today we continue on in our look into the Book of Joel. As I mentioned last week, this is not an easy book to figure out, especially without any historical anchors to allow us to take these prophecies and connect them nicely to events that we read about in other places of scripture.

But, the lack of a certain historical context, in a way, can make it easier for us to hone in on what is the central theme of the book itself. I'm going to do something a little different today. We're going to read the key verse of the chapter that is found in our text today, and then we are going to go back and see how the text builds up to this theme verse, all of which you can stay seated for today. If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Joel 2:27. [Read]

"You shall know that I am the LORD!" What we see here in vs. 27 is God's ultimate purpose for his people. That his own people would know that he is God. There is a lot wrapped up in that statement when we examine it as not just an isolated verse in the book of Joel but rather as a theme that spreads throughout the entirety of God's word.

When God created the world in Genesis we read that he created man in his own image. Theologically speaking, we understand that he did this for the purpose of his creation having the capacity to know him. And not just to know him in a general type of knowledge sense, like you might know the answer to a math problem, but that he created mankind so that we might know him in a personal, relational kind of way.

Specifically, we see in scripture, that God's people are to know that he is in the midst of them. God throughout the old testament had given the people picture after picture so that they could understand the glorious privilege that was theirs, to be a people with whom he dwelt. The tabernacle and then the temple served as the greatest of these examples. In the midst of Israel was the Holy of Holies, a place where God in all of his magnificent glory dwelt.

This then flows into the NT and John tells us in the first chapter of his gospel that this glorious presence then became a reality when God himself took on flesh and became a man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. John says in John 1:14, "And the Word took on flesh and dwelt (literally, "tabernacled") among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Fast forward to after his resurrection, to when Jesus meets with his disciples one last time before his ascension. What does he promise them? "Behold, I am with you always. Even to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20) And then, in Rev. 21:3, at the culmination of all things when Jesus comes again and establishes his kingdom, we read, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

And so, this is not just an isolated promise in the Book of Joel, but a running theme throughout the Bible.

So we see how it fits into redemptive history, but here in Joel, it points to a specific moment in time, a reality in which these people have been restored on the other side of this great Day of the Lord judgement and that this will never happen again.

This promise is a promise to the believing remnant, the people within the people, the true Israel, those who we read in Romans 4 walk in the footsteps of the faith of their father Abraham!

This is the same lack of shame spoken of in Romans 5 where we read: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” [Rom. 5:1-5]

For these people, the “My people” of Joel 2:27 who have been so united to God that they know him and experience his presence in their midst, there remains no source of shame! How can there be shame when they have received the greatest inheritance imaginable, God himself in their midst. And the same is true for us, those who are in Christ.

So that is where we are headed, the goal of our great God in all of his workings with his people, and so with that said lets back up and work our way back through the rest of the chapter.

Let me start by summarizing the first 11 verses of ch. 2. In Joel 1, where we were last week, the prophet spoke of the judgment that had arrived in Judah (a plague of locusts and drought). In Joel 2, he begins by describing the judgment that will come, a mighty army set against Judah. Since this is all part of “God’s day” not “man’s day,” it is described as the day of the LORD.

When we are right with God, we want the day of the LORD. We long for him to show his strength because we know that we abide in him. When we are not right with God, we dread the day of the LORD, because when God shows himself strong, his strength may work against us. In Joel’s day Judah was not right with God; so the day of the LORD would be nothing but darkness and gloominess to them.

As impressive as this army is, Joel does not want Judah to forget that its real power lies in the fact that God has sent them. They will be his tool of judgment against Judah unless they repent. When the plague of locusts and the drought devastated Judah, you might have thought that Joel would encourage the people. He might have said, “Hang in there! Things are bad, but they will get better.” Instead, Joel said, “You think that was bad? Worse is to come if we don’t repent.”

This leads up to our passage today starting in vs. 12. Look with me there. [Read vs. 12-17] God calls for his people to return. We see in the first verse of this call to return the only instance of the typical prophetic phrase “declares the Lord” in the Book of Joel and these people’s ears ought to have, and likely did, perk up here. They are experiencing the judgement of the locusts and Joel has now confronted them with the horror of what is yet to

come if they remain unchanged in their wicked ways and now God himself is the one who personally calls out to his covenant people, “return to me!” A common repeated phrase throughout the minor prophets and our the basis for our theme.

Repentance comes in one of two ways. First, we repent because we heed the warning of judgment. These people needed this wake up call. For them, the weight of sin was to be seen in the horror of the devastation left behind by the locust and the warning of future judgment. But for those of us on this side of the cross, we don't always come face to face with the consequences, or the immediate judgement, of our sin like that. But, even though that is the case, the most gut wrenching image of the horror of our sin, no matter how insignificant we may believe it to be, is the very Son of God, died on the cross because of it. Do we need a greater picture of the wickedness of our own sin than the price that was paid by Jesus to deliver us from it? These pictures of the cost of sin are meant to, as God calls through Joel here, to drive us to return to him!

Because they heard the warning of judgment, God's people should repent. It doesn't make their repentance less valid because they had to be scared into it. The important thing is that they turn back to the LORD in sincerity, and God tells them how. Sincere repentance is to turn to God, and therefore away from our sin.

God is not interested in outward turning, this is not about doing something better or just simply changing behavior, this is about changing the direction of their hearts. God says, “Rend your heart, and not your garments.” One expression of mourning in Jewish culture was, and is, the tearing of the clothes. Joel knew that someone could tear their garments without tearing their heart, and he described the kind of heart-repentance that really pleases God. God would have their hearts or nothing at all! This reminds me of David's prayer in Ps. 51, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Ps. 51:17)

But what's the basis to fall back on here? How do we know that God would even have mercy? Because of who he is. And here we see Joel here go back to Moses in the wilderness as God walked before him declaring his name to Moses within the rock. When Moses was in the midst of interceding for the Israelites before God we read these passages:

“And God said, I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” (Ex. 33:19-20) And then ch. 34, “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.” (Ex. 34:6-8)

The natural outworking of coming to know God in this way is worship, the overflow of a heart that has been turned toward God. That's what we saw happen to Moses and that is exactly what is commanded from the people in the coming verses, returning to a true heart worship!

However, it's important for us to see that repentance does not force God to relent. People don't merit God's turning from anger to mercy. One commentary on this passage l

read this week, had this to say about verse 14. It was a little unclear who to attribute to, but here's what it said: "For 'who knows' exactly how the Almighty in his wisdom will respond? For 'Repentance no more controls him than do the magic incantations of pagan priests.' 'Penitence is not a means of pressuring Yahweh into an automatic response, nor can his freedom be [restrained] by it. He retains his sovereignty.'" This is also fleshed out for us farther in the NT but we see there that the reason that this is ultimately because even the turning to God is a work of God, specifically in Phil. 2:12-13: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

And look at the blessing that is to be primarily expected, what is it that God leaves behind in his forgiveness of the people? The very items needed for worship! The true fruit of repentance is a heart of worship and that heart God will provide with what is needed to worship Him! This is exactly what was lost during the devastation of the locusts.

We see at the end of this call to return to the LORD one last thing to note. In vs. 17, we see that the primary concern of God's people is God's glory! Joel puts a rich prayer of repentance into the mouths of God's priests. It is as if the priests should pray with the thought, "How can we persuade God to have mercy on us?" First, "spare." This implies that God's people deserve judgment, but they plead for mercy. Then, "Your people." This reminds God that they belong to Him and provides another motivation for mercy. And then, "Do not give Your heritage to reproach." This tells God that mercy unto His people will bring Him glory among the nations and that judgment may bring His name into discredit.

Which leads us to the second point, God shows his people mercy. Let's continue reading starting in vs. 18. [Read vs. 18-26]

In this last section, we see that God does indeed show them mercy. We see God here describe the restoration of the land as he turns toward his people in love again. We also see the second reason for repentance, because of who God is. His mercy draws us in. God promised to restore material prosperity in vs. 19, again notice what is restored compared to what was lost in ch. 1, and he promises this to a repentant Judah. God would turn the attention of His judgment away from His people and now against this mighty army.

And then God promises that, "You will be satisfied." A person may have plenty to eat, with access to all the pleasures of the world, and yet not be satisfied. People who have these things in the greatest abundance are often the least satisfied. Being contented is a gift that comes from God only to those who have returned to him. When we have turned to God we can expect, no matter what comes our way, to be fully satisfied. Such is the nature of the fullness of our God that overflows into our lives!

And then in vs. 21 and following, Joel looked forward to the restoration that God promised, and he told Judah to look forward in faith, and to praise God for the restoration He promised even before they saw it with their own eyes. With the eye of faith, Joel could already see it happening. All around him were the lush, fruitful pastures and trees that God had restored after the destruction of the locusts.

At the end of Joel 1, the prophet saw the destruction drought brought. Now with the eye of faith he sees God restoring both the former and latter rain to Israel. Ancient Israel had no irrigation system and relied on rain to water their crops. In a time of drought, nothing

grew. God promises to restore both the former rain (falling in autumn) and the latter rain (falling in spring). When God restores these rains, Judah will have full threshing floors and wine vats.

Then we come to the familiar promise of vs. 25. [Read] God promised to restore what was taken away in judgment. When the locusts did their work, it looked complete and final, but God promised that He could even restore the years that the swarming locusts has eaten. Charles Spurgeon had this to say about this verse, "The locusts ate the fruits of the years' labor, the harvests of the fields; so that the meaning of the restoration of the years must be the restoration of those fruits and of those harvests which the locusts consumed. You cannot have back your time; but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned. The fruits of wasted years may yet be yours."

The people did indeed repent and God did not bring the disaster for the invading army upon them and on top of that he is restoring what was destroyed. Such is the great mercy of God.

And this all leads to praise and worship abound for God "who has dealt wondrously with you" in vs. 26. And then we are right back where we started at the beginning, God's remnant, the faithful in Israel can experience this intimate knowing of God, experience His blessed presence with them!

This is the hope of all of God's people! We have a hope that will never put us to shame! These promises are for God's people, those who have put faith and trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross. He is the glorious one who saves and it is with him that we long to dwell forever, it is him who we worship and praise, it is in him that we find our satisfaction and our joy, and it is in him that this unshakable hope is found! Our merciful God has called us to return to a true heart of worship. May we have ears to listen to his call. Let's pray.

Benediction: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen"